

Popular Music and the Politics of Novelty

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To Onsind, whose songs make me optimistic for the future.

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Introduction

The thrust of this book should not be difficult to grasp: my purpose is, in short, to explore the nexus of politics, novelty and popular music. Today, many commentators seem to feel that popular music is 'all played out'; creatively, it peaked long ago and, although there may have been novel eruptions here and there in recent decades, popular music is now supposedly at an impasse where repetition of past glories is the best we can hope for. Is such pessimism well founded? And is it important – is it *politically* important – for popular music to do something

new? Alternatively, could some value be retained – some political power and/or influence – if the concern for doing something new is simply dropped from the popular music agenda?

For pop to drop the new seems almost unimaginable. Doesn't popular music predicate itself on offering something 'shiny and new'?¹ We can at least say that a sense of novelty has tended to be associated with this musical area, for a hundred years and more. Is new-ness *necessary* for popular music, though? If popular music today is simply delivering repetitions of past glories – precisely the complaint of many a handwringing journalist – does it follow, for example, that such aesthetic conservatism entails an acceptance of capitalism as (to use one of Slavoj Žižek's favoured phrases) 'the only game in town'?² Alternatively, might it be possible for those who would wish for a radically different (and thus 'new', presumably) society to promote or even pursue such a goal *without* offering an ostentatious musical novelty?

We cannot even approach these questions without unpicking some key terms. Firstly, then, 'popular music': a category so fraught with difficulties that an ex-colleague of mine, the incomparable Dai Griffiths, would routinely preface any reference to it with the caution that it is 'so-called'.³ For Pete van der Merwe, 'the term "popular" is an infernal nuisance'.⁴ The

¹ Madonna, 'Like a Virgin', *Like a Virgin*, Sire, 1984.

² Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p.95. Žižek uses the same catchphrase in his introduction to Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.xi.

³ See, for example, Dai Griffiths, 'What Was, or Is, Critical Musicology?', *Radical Musicology*, 5 (2010-11), accessed 19th March 2015, wherein we also read of 'so-called classical music' and 'so-called contemporary classical'.

⁴ Peter van der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.3

constitutionally problematic nature of the couplet is reflected in the publication by the *Popular Music* journal of a ‘virtual symposium’, conducted by their international advisory editors, enquiring as to whether the first term of the equation should in fact be dropped.⁵ In conclusion of the symposium, Richard Middleton (who remains the most radical of musicologists who have taken an interest in so-called popular music, I would suggest) proposes, after Lacan (via Žižek), that ‘(The) Popular music does not exist’.⁶ A cynic might want to complain that this follows a remarkable pattern amongst academics: similar to E.H. Carr’s question *What is History?* and also the discussions of ‘real numbers’ amongst advanced mathematicians (thus implying that numbers could be other than ‘real’, and that History also is not a given, doubtless to the dismay of many an undergraduate student), a critical observer might object that Middleton has simply followed suit by throwing into question the very object of enquiry.⁷ I would argue, as would Middleton I’m sure, that there is a bit more to it than this.

Popular music is a problematic category because, amongst other difficulties, it has so often been used as a catch-all for that which escapes the other large categories of music. At its most broad, (so-called) popular music can include *everything* beyond ‘classical music’ (whatever that is). This book is not intended as an intervention into the various debates about what is, isn’t or might/might not be classified as popular music. A sledgehammer point of principle for what follows, however, is that it is completely unsatisfactory to treat everything which falls outside of, say, ‘world music’, folk and European-descended ‘art music’ categories as

⁵ Simon Frith et al, ‘Can we get rid of the “popular” in popular music? A virtual symposium with contributions from the International Advisory Editors of Popular Music’, *Popular Music*, 24/1 (2005).

⁶ Ibid, p.144.

⁷ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

one thing, a single genre: popular music. There are so many popular musics that, in practice, the term can seem virtually useless. In an academic context, that said, the gradual acceptance of ‘pop’ as a viable object for scholarly consideration has been immensely beneficial to countless young people to whom the music feels important.

Popular music is plural, then – hence Middleton’s emphatic bracketing of the ‘(The)’ above. For our purposes, however, a difference of trajectory can be observed between two (or, arguably, four) general tendencies within the field: some popular music feels more politically and/or aesthetically conservative whilst other species of ‘pop’ would seem to be more politically and/or aesthetically radical. The scare quotes around pop are necessary here because some of the most radical popular music would seem an ill-fit with this descriptor: are Throbbing Gristle pop? Crass, Buffy Saint Marie, Manu Chao or Pete Seeger – is this really ‘pop music’? Is Billy Bragg just a ‘popstar’ – or is something rather different going on here as compared with, say, the Osmonds, Britney Spears or Bruno Mars? Hopefully the reader can agree that there are differences of intention and aspiration (desire, dare we say?) at stake; differences which are identifiable and worth talking about.

The difference of trajectory in question, though, is of course far from constituting any absolute dichotomy. On the contrary, one should quickly concede that every creator of music mentioned in the previous paragraph has retailed products in exchange for cash; and even though records, money and food have been given away free of charge by the likes of Crass, it is obviously the case that philanthropy cannot defeat capitalism. Quite the contrary; the two have been bedfellows for centuries now.

What *can* defeat capitalism, though? Hopefully the question is not entirely risible. A further sledgehammer declaration may be required here, and it is worth adding that I do not hesitate to make it: I would contend that popular music *can* make valuable contributions to the search

for an anti-capitalist future. The question, though, is *how*? What should left wing music sound like, today? What aesthetic compass might it best use? These are the core questions of this book. Above all, I want to ask: should popular music aspire to being new in order to contribute to resistance to the current ideological and societal structure (capitalism, that is; or ‘late capitalism’, ‘globalisation’, ‘neo-liberalism’ – the state we’re in, in other words)?

In order to approach that question, we need to extend the initial clarification of terminology. What, then, is the ‘novelty’ mentioned in the book’s title? To some extent, the term refers simply to ostentatious new-ness: novelty is the new, or the felt to be new; the sensation of unfamiliarity which one sometimes feels or, perhaps, the object which kindles that feeling. The distinction which I am beginning to draw with even this brief sketch of a definition is a key one in philosophical terms: is novelty some objective event or object as such (‘the new’) or is it something which, broadly speaking, is subjectively grasped (a ‘new sense’)? If ‘subjective’ (for now, let us be content with the scare quotes as a signal of the contested implications of this word), the new would seem to be merely a new sense: and this phenomenological status would seem to be rather a *nuisance* (pun intended) for the idea that the new is always also the radical. If ‘objective’, though, the new-as-such would also be a creation *ex nihilo*, surely? What else, after all, can the new be other than something which has arrived from nowhere, something which previously was entirely absent?

Creation *ex nihilo*, however, is an idea even more fraught with difficulties than the notion of ‘popular music’: how can we speak of such a thing when it is obvious, if considered seriously, that the possibility for us to speak of, say, ‘new music’ presupposes a level of agreement on its identifiable new-ness which, being identifiable, surely counteracts the very idea that what we speak of was previously unthinkable. Take the opening bars of *Eroica*, the ‘Tristan chord’, the first signs of frenzy in Part II of *Le Sacre du printemps*: what is identifiable as not having been done before (primarily, the undermining of functional tonal

arrangement as well as some rhythmical peculiarities and, also, some previously unknown uses of dynamics), because it is identifiable, must have been thinkable previously even if it had not been enacted previously. If we can recognise something as new, the absolute novelty of that something immediately falls into question precisely because the possibility of recognition establishes that this 'new' thing has occurred within a framework which, presumably, is 'the old'. One need not read a great deal of Hegel to see that, considered this way, the new becomes a correlate of the old and not at all a discrete object; at least, its novelty cannot be an entirely discrete phenomenon.

This issue at stake has a long pedigree: Michael North has shown that the problem is one of the oldest in human thought, with clear roots in pre-Socratic thinking (specifically, Parmenides and Empedocles); it is obviously central to the wide range of discourses concerned with postmodernism.⁸ And yet, as North also shows, the basic issue remains a matter of fascination today; indeed, modernity (let's say the period since the Renaissance) and modernism (the great Twentieth century movement towards an aesthetically radical novelty, which I shall discuss in chapter four) have only increased the importance of the idea of the new. North is emphatic that 'many new things are revolutionary only in the original sense of the term'.⁹ Appropriately, he bases such claims on the work of Hannah Arendt who has demonstrated that 'The modern concept of revolution, inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold, was unknown prior to the two great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century'.¹⁰ Arendt also evidences that the etymology

⁸ Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁹ *Ibid*, p.204.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p.28.

of the word 'revolution' derives from astronomy, with an implication of lawful regularity and return, such that it was not the rise of Cromwell which was considered a revolution in mid-seventeenth century Britain but, rather, the overthrow of the Rump Parliament in 1660 and the expulsion of James II in 1688.¹¹

In the end, Michael North goes as far as to suggest that 'it is so clear that there is nothing new'. However, he adds, in the closing sentences of his book, that 'future speakers speaking in unprecedented situations' can allow that 'the possibility of novelty exists'.¹² This paradoxical quality of the idea of the new forms our starting point but not our central point of enquiry: whether novelty is possible or not is less our concern than the question as to its efficacy for moving towards a revolutionary change in society. With regard to the latter concern, we can assert the dispiriting nature of claims that 'there is nothing new'. We also might affirm that North's 'future speakers' can give us cause for optimism: we can, it seems, accept novelty as 'possibility' at least. Who could claim they have never felt, at some moment in their lives, the thrilling arrival of something which seems entirely new? Perhaps all that we really have, at that moment, is a felt-reality; a new sense, as I call it. A political question follows from this in any case, though: can this new sense offer a nuisance for those who would conserve the state we're in?

For our purposes, it is vital to also ask: can popular music kindle a new sense, now, in the twenty first century, sufficient to lead us towards societal change? Was it ever much capable of such kindling? The second question is frequently touched upon in chapters one, two and three, with chapter two making a particularly firm assertion that rumours of the political importance of pop, rock and folk musics in 'the sixties' may have been greatly exaggerated.

¹¹Ibid, pp.42-3.

¹²North, *Novelty*, p.204 and p.207.

This challenge to received wisdom regarding the sixties is extended in chapter three with an enquiry into the late-1970s punk idea of a ‘Year Zero’. By contrast, in chapter six I attempt to show that there is a great deal to suggest that practitioners of (so-called) popular music continue to demonstrate a desire for social change and a willingness not only to raise consciousness with regards to such a possibility but, in some cases, to actively work towards concrete outcomes. The most politically active practitioners I discuss are little known beyond a fairly small milieu of ‘fans’ (or, more often, like-minded individuals for whom the word fan is actually not too appropriate); accordingly, some issues around mainstream and periphery are touched upon. A good number of relatively mainstream practitioners are shown to have political interests, in any case.

Towards the end of chapter six I offer some tentative consideration of future possibilities – the horizon for ‘future speakers speaking in unprecedented situations’, to use North’s phrase – wherein, perhaps, popular music could become more politically radical than it has ever been. In keeping with the book overall, however, I query the idea that this would necessarily entail an *aesthetically* radical change to popular music: why would that be necessary? The question is surely worth asking since so many seem to view popular music as having hit an aesthetic dead-end at the present time.

Who are these complainants? One example, selected almost at random, is Morrissey who, in an interview with *The Telegraph* on 17th June 2011 argued that ‘the pop chart today... has nothing to do with moving music forward’. (Interestingly, though, he adds later in the interview that ‘Pop music *has* progressed’ during his thirty years in the business.) Sometimes the complaint is related to recording technology: Bob Dylan, for example, is quoted by *The Guardian* on 24th August 2006 as claiming that ‘I don't know anybody who's made a record that sounds decent in the past 20 years, really.’ (We can also note, here, a research paper published in *Scientific Reports* which argues that contemporary popular music has moved

towards having ‘less variety in pitch transitions, towards a consistent homogenization of the timbral palette, and towards louder and, in the end, potentially poorer volume dynamics’.¹³) For others, it is the business and the ‘celebrity factor’ which prevents popular music from returning to some former glory: ‘Young managers don’t talk about music anymore; they talk about anything but’, Pete Waterman has argued in *The Tab* on 12th October 2012. (Of interest again, though, is his interviewer’s declaration that ‘Modern pop is peppered with nods to retro styles and throwbacks to eras gone by’ to which Waterman replies ‘It’s up to you to create the next batch of memories – something that’s relevant to you, not what’s relevant to your grandfather or your great grandfather.’)

Elsewhere, an on-line spoof newspaper *The Daily Mash* offered a satirical article 19th March 2014 which can tell us much about current feelings with regards to novelty, politics and the (perceived) attitudes of young people towards popular music. Under the headline ‘Modern youth not starting a subculture unless they get paid for it’, the article begins by stating that ‘Generation Y kids say they have the raw energy to create something way better than rave or punk, but first they would like to know who’s sponsoring it’. A fictional 17 year old is quoted as follows: ‘We’ve got great concepts interweaving music, drugs and politics in radical new ways that will change the world forever... But first we need a cash injection to get our subculture through the development stage.’ The spoof is reasonably amusing in itself. It is also useful for our purposes because, read properly (that is, with awareness of the article’s satirical nature), it reflects a very widespread concern common to many older people: the fictional 17 year old promises music which people over the age of 30 ‘cannot relate to any level... But I want the government, my parents or any corporation to give me £60 per hour to

¹³ Joan Serrà et al, ‘Measuring the Evolution of Western Popular Music’, *Scientific Reports* 2 (2012), accessed 18/3/14.

think about this, otherwise we'll all have to keep flogging rave to death, or just being into 80s charty hip hop in a semi-ironic way.' Young people don't think twice before taking money from 'any corporation', the article seems to be implying; furthermore, the young appear to have abdicated their responsibility for creating something new in popular music. Regarding 'corporations', we will see in chapter six that many young people involved in popular music today *are* demonstrably attempting to resist the corporate grip of multi-national 'mega-conglomerates', in fact. Conversely, it's worth remembering that the supposedly most radical eras of popular music – left-wing folk, punk, aspects of the rave scene, 'the sixties' – also involved many key players who were evidently willing to take money from, shall we say, less ethical investors.

The most vocal criticiser of contemporary popular music is probably Simon Reynolds. In his book *Retromania* he suggests that a 'generational deficiency' caused pop, from the mid-1980s onwards, to fail to live up to its potential: 'Could it be that the greatest danger to the future of our music culture is... *its past?*'¹⁴ For Reynolds, it is a *sine qua non* that 'pop music should be challenging and perpetually progressing'.¹⁵ Many have responded positively to his book, such as Sukhdev Sandhu who wrote in *The Observer* on 29th May 2011 that the book deserves to be widely read. Of additional interest to us, however, is Sandhu's pointed remark that 'Pop's appeal doesn't just lie in its ability to shock and surprise; it can also be a source of safety and succour, especially when life – life under capitalism – feels concussive,

¹⁴ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p.178 and p.ix. For other critical comments I have made with regards to Reynolds' work, see my article 'Death to Trad Historicism: Futuremania, avant-gardism and Scottish post-Punk 1985–1994', *Punk and Post Punk* 2/2 (2013) and in sections of my book *Anyone Can Do It: Empowerment, Tradition and the Punk Underground* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), especially pp.187-192.

¹⁵ Reynolds, *Retromania*, p.410.

brutalising'. This element is precisely what Adorno seemed to fail to concede with regard to popular music, of course: whilst it may be the case that 'novelty is that characteristic of consumer goods through which they ... [stimulate] consumer decisions subject to the needs of capital', (so-called) popular music can also be one hell of a good vehicle for forgetting about your job on a Saturday night.¹⁶ We might also read something of a riposte to Adornian thinking in Sandhu's remark that 'For listeners, *not* embracing the Next Big Thing may be a kind of resistance': we are not so easy to con, Sandhu seems to be saying.

This idea that not worrying about radical *aesthetic* novelty is thereby something of a subtle *political* move on the part of contemporary youth will be returned to in chapter six below. Before concluding this introduction, however, some comments regarding chapter five need to be offered. It is probably the most challenging chapter in the book; more so, at least, than chapter four where I sketch out some issues relating to modernism, late modernism and the 'postmodern turn' in a manner which I hope is not too difficult to apprehend. Chapter five is challenging for the less 'academic' reader, perhaps, due to the philosophical themes upon which I draw, but also challenging to parts of the academic community, I suspect, because I argue against several key themes in the currently widely-read work of Badiou. I hope, that said, that the chapter is not too difficult to digest nor too controversial in regards to the philosophy under discussion – my feeling, on balance, is that Badiou's work is valuable even though, as will become clear, I do not agree with everything he says. (It is possible to skip chapter five without missing a great deal of the overall argument I am mounting here; I hope,

¹⁶ Quoted in North, *Novelty*, p.19. North suggests that, for Adorno, 'novelty is one of the most basic requirements of the capitalist market', p.149. However, we don't necessarily have to disagree with Adorno's claim to add that popular music can allow a certain 'survival mechanism' for individuals who find life under the capitalist market barely tolerable.

though, that readers will persevere with the chapter since, as I have said, Badiou's philosophy is highly regarded and certainly worthy of attention.)

It is hoped that the book, taken as a whole, can offer an argument for an on-going validity for popular music *without* resorting to aesthetic conservatism or constructing an apologia for capitalism, let alone proposing despair at the rise of neoliberalism. Young people today are making music, and many of them are doing this with a wholly optimistic view of possible futures. I would suggest that, for those of us who are well into our middle age and older to complain (after Wilde) that 'youth is wasted on the young' is necessarily counter-revolutionary: Wilde's quip may amuse, but it works only because one can read from it (between the lines, perhaps) a fascination with the shiny-eyed idealism of youth. Popular music is not just about young people, of course; the opposite even more certainly applies, however. On this last point, let us give the last word to Mark E. Smith of Manchester's legendary group The Fall: 'We're living in a re-issue world, filching from the past like magpies with a Tardis'. On Smith's view, 'Kids [are] growing up hearing their mams and dads talk about how great 1976 and 1981 were' but 'it's bullshit. There have never been any great years. You get the odd moment here and there, but never a clean year of wonder.'¹⁷ I think the comment is fair – and yet I can't help but hope that a clean year of wonder could arrive. How different, though, would the fundamental character of popular music be in that year relative to the way it sounds currently and has sounded in the past? This, in essence, is the core question of the present book.

Chapter One: 1899 and All That

¹⁷ Mark E. Smith and Austin Collings, *Renegade: The Lives and Tales of Mark E. Smith* (London: Penguin, 2008), p.191.

Pop music didn't just drop out of nowhere, fully formed and perfectly new; the idea that such an arrival could be possible is surely risible: what comes out of a void? In fact, popular music is a sub-category of music; almost anyone (with the possible exception of Alain Badiou) will admit this much.¹⁸ It utilises instruments, a sense of harmony and melody and a whole lot more which were passed along from the European musical tradition. As everyone knows, however, popular music doesn't *only* come out of that tradition: rather, above all else, it seems to bring largely African-derived musical traditions to bear upon a European inheritance. Or should that be put the other way around? This may even be our first political question about popular music. It would take a much bolder musicologist than the present author to insist upon prioritising one side over the other, however. Let us just say, then, that popular music blends African and European musical traditions. So far, hopefully, we are on safe ground.

Our next question may be more inflammatory – I hope it will be, indeed. *When* does popular music arrive? It is doubtful that anyone would want to deny that popular music has some elements which derive from pre-existing musical traditions. The question as to the first statement of whatever-it-is-that-was-new-about-it occurred, by contrast, is ripe for argument.

The title of the present chapter has been chosen for one primary reason: received wisdom seems to agree that popular music is largely a twentieth century phenomenon (see, for

¹⁸ Badiou has challenged the idea that we must necessarily afford the status of music to sounds which classify themselves as music, decrying 'an aesthetics of non-distinction, according to which we are pretty much obliged to accept as music anything that comes under the heading of music', Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner* (London: Verso, 2010), p.3. Having made a provocatively reductive summary of what is normally known as popular music on the previous page ('David Bowie, rap, and so forth', p.2), Badiou is at least hinting that popular music may not really be deserving of the title 'music'.

example, the fifty-point history of popular music, published by *The Guardian* on 11th June 2011, which begins in 1944). We need to challenge this, because it is clear that something like Scott Joplin's 'Maple Leaf Rag' of 1899 is a fair contender for inclusion within the bracket 'popular music'. Is this where it begins, then? At the tip of Joplin's pen (for, lest we forget, his compositions were notated)? An argument to this effect would surely be hard to maintain, as we shall see. How about England's 'music hall' tradition, then? Again, a little close observation of this area of music will show us that the elements which mark the music out as 'popular' rather than, say, 'folk' or 'art music' do not in fact come from nowhere. In a third example, I will draw the reader's attention to the copious inheritances which 1950s 'rock'n'roll' took from pre-existing sources. In each case, I am interested not only in questions as to how novel the music was but also how extrinsically important the elements of apparent novelty may have been; and the question as to what political significance we can link to the element of novelty.

Before discussing these three particular sub-categories of popular music, I want to touch upon some ideas put forward by Richard Middleton in *From Liszt to Music Hall*, an Open University study text published in the late 1970s.¹⁹ Middleton being a dominant voice within popular music studies and this text having been prepared for self-study in a 'distance learning' context, *From Liszt to Music Hall* should be fairly reliable as a source for initial consideration of salient facts regarding the development of popular music in the nineteenth century. In his 'Preamble', Middleton poses a question of particular interest for our own purposes: given that 'classical' concerts are typically 'made up of music by dead composers' and given our simultaneous demand that living composers 'produce something original and

¹⁹ Richard Middleton, *From Liszt to Music Hall* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1977).

new’ – all this given, ‘Why do we demand the new and at the same time prefer the old?’²⁰ It’s a great question, probably going a long way towards explaining the limited audience for contemporary composition. Middleton counterpoises ‘new world’-creating composers (with good reason he brings the folk-inspired work of Stravinsky as an ironic example) against ‘a music rooted in the “real” world – our popular music’.²¹

This is classic (early) Middleton, and doubtless the argument made particular sense in a 1970s context when popular music still seemed to be burgeoning with novelty and limited in its retrogressive tendencies. In the second decade of the twenty first century, however, things look a little different. Indeed, we can pose much the same question at the contemporary pop scene. Why do so many current writers, commentators, musicians and fans complain of a perceived lack of new directions in popular music (Hot Chip: ‘Pop music has become conservative’, *Uncut*, May 28th 2012) when, in truth, they seem much to prefer the ‘classic’ stuff from the past (Hot Chip: ‘The late Beatles, obviously, but Prince, too’, *Skiddle.com*, Feb 5th 2012)? If, say, progressive rock was musically interesting in the early 1970s, why shouldn’t bright young things such as Kiran Leonard find the musical characteristics associated with this form of popular music remain interesting still?²² Granted, Leonard’s music draws on music from the past and could, therefore, be tarred as exhibiting some form of ‘retromania’; but the political implication of such chauvinism for pop/rock’s past glories (‘it’s all been done before’, as they say) is surely worth considering.

Such a consideration will be developed in later chapters. The Middletonian challenge to assumptions of a hard distinction between the popular and ‘art’ music fields is worth keeping

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.5.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Kiran Leonard, *Bowler Hat Soup* (Hand of Glory), 2013.

in mind for the present chapter, however. We also should consider the implications of the following question: ‘could one see rock music as part of a counter-culture within popular music, one perhaps which might be compared with that offered by nineteenth century “bohemian” artists, like Liszt, who were revolted by the social developments of *their* day?’²³ Perhaps so; but how significant, actually, is this perceived link? Liszt may have been inspired by Saint-Simon and the revolutions of 1830, just as Scott Joplin clearly invested importance in the post-slavery dignity of ‘the negro race’: if art holds up a mirror to society, however, the jump to political agency is far from a necessary consequence.²⁴ In any case, what is going on *politically* when popular music coughs up ‘the new thing’? On this question, let us turn firstly to ragtime music and the immensely popular work of Scott Joplin – a composer whose significance is, according to Susan Curtis, ‘certainly comparable to Schoenberg’.²⁵

The King of Ragtime

According to Katherine Preston, ‘prior to the advent of ragtime, there was very little popular music in the United States that incorporated such complex rhythms... at the turn of the century, ragtime’s rhythms were *entirely new*, somewhat mysterious and devilishly hard to master.’²⁶ Her celebratory account of the musical work of Scott Joplin – consistently promoted by his publisher John Stark as ‘the king of ragtime’ – is largely justified in its enthusiasm: it is hard not to admire the marked seriousness of Joplin as a man and the clear salience of his compositions within a ragtime context. However, if Joplin really *was* a king,

²³ Middleton, *From Liszt*, p.65.

²⁴ Ibid, p.28; Susan Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

²⁵ Curtis, *Dancing*, p.3.

²⁶ Katherine Preston, *Scott Joplin: Composer* (California: Melrose Square, 1988), pp.99-102, emphasis added.

why did he die penniless, destitute and in despair in 1917? Perhaps he should have been a king; but it would be close to a century after his death before the US would have even have a ‘black’ president, let alone a king. From a serious political point of view, then, to what extent can Joplin’s story suggest the way we should really want things to be, with regards to popular music and ‘the new’?

We should begin with a sketch of the life of this remarkable African American composer.

Born in 1868 in Texas, the son of a slave who had been freed the previous decade, Scott Joplin initially excelled on the banjo before taking up the piano as a boy. Although his father, Jiles Joplin, is reported to have learnt some violin in his youth and to have played in his master’s house as part of the plantation orchestra, his son’s abilities appear to have gone well beyond expectations from a young age. For example, Preston quotes an ‘old family neighbour’ describing the way that the boy ‘just got his music out of the air’ in a manner which would defy any assumptions of a simple inheritance of skill from an enthusiastic parent.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, given this gift and Joplin’s upbringing in what we would call a context of ‘socio-economic disadvantage’, he took up the life of a travelling musician in in the mid-1880s. Time spent in St. Louis will doubtless have exposed him to an exceptional melting pot of musical styles which ‘poured through his ears and filtered through his brain at almost every waking hour of the day’.²⁸ A still more formative influence upon the young Joplin, at least in terms of his *ambition*, would seem to have been the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Scholars have been unable to provide conclusive evidence that Joplin took part in this event, but there is a general agreement that he probably did.²⁹ In any case, the event seems to

²⁷ Ibid, p.35 and p.42.

²⁸ Peter Gammond, *Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1975), p.44.

²⁹ Curtis, *Dancing*, pp.45-6.

have enabled the ‘penetration of white consciousness’ in respect of hitherto little regarded traditions of African American music.³⁰ By the mid-1890s, Joplin is said to have believed he had refined the ‘new music the public wanted to hear’.³¹

Subsequent sales of the sheet music for his compositions in the early years of the twentieth century would suggest such self-belief was well founded. That said, we can note that he was initially not especially well received by publishers, several of whom rejected works including the era-defining *Maple Leaf Rag*.³² Furthermore, sales of the *Maple Leaf Rag*, when it was initially published by John Stark and Son in 1899, were far from overwhelming – under 400 copies in its first twelve months, seemingly.³³ By the following Autumn, the situation changed significantly: Stark and Son could not keep up with demand and had to cancel publication of all orders besides the sheet in question.³⁴ By all accounts, the demand for and enthusiasm about this rag was extraordinary. A claim that it ‘blew the lid off the musical world and set it into the greatest musical craze that the world has ever known’ is certainly overstated – many a twentieth century musical ‘craze’ has fair claim to being ‘greater’ in a range of senses.³⁵ Widely repeated claims of sales in excess of a million are also unfounded – half a million in its first ten years would appear to be a more accurate figure.³⁶ Nevertheless,

³⁰ Ibid, p.48.

³¹ Ibid, p.56.

³² Preston, *Scott*, p.85.

³³ Ibid, p.88.

³⁴ Ibid, p.89.

³⁵ Curtis, *Dancing*, p.56.

³⁶ Ibid, p.68.

the piece was without doubt a runaway success which remains popular with amateur pianists and enthusiasts of popular music to this day.

Other Joplin rags of note are numerous, including of course *The Entertainer* (1901) – the cornerstone of the 1970s ragtime revival, thanks to the 1973 film *The Sting*. Less well known (particularly during his lifetime) but very much of note are his operatic works. His first effort in this regard, *Guest of Honour*, soured his hitherto mutually respectful relationship with publisher John Stark because ‘People wanted rags they could sing or play on their parlour pianos. They did not want to buy a ragtime ballet or opera.’³⁷ The story is archetypal of popular music: Joplin ‘was interested in elevating ragtime from the realm of popular music to the realm of serious art music. Stark was not interested in elevating music – he was interested in selling it. After all, he was a businessman.’³⁸ In short, their publishing relationship collapsed as a result of Joplin’s aspirations. His final efforts towards creating what he called ‘folk opera’ were unsuccessful during his lifetime: the (initially) ill-fated *Treemonisha* was performed once only, in 1915 with Joplin forced to attempt an approximation of his orchestral arrangements on a single piano for a tiny and seemingly indifferent audience primarily made up of friends and family. ‘The listeners were sophisticated enough to reject their folk past’, Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis have argued, ‘but not sufficiently to relish a return to it in art. Nor have they, it may be remarked, reached that stage even today’.³⁹ Joplin’s mental and emotional state went into an immediate and severe decline thereafter, resulting in placement in a mental institution where he would spend the remaining months of

³⁷ Preston, *Scott*, p.114.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p.106.

³⁹ Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime: The True Story of an American Music* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1960), p.249.

his life. Although *Treemonisha* would be performed again in the 1970s, at last granted the kind of critical praise (including a posthumous Pulitzer prize in 1976) which his numerous piano rags also received during the same decade, the composer seems to have died believing his life to have been a failure.

As noted, Preston wants to claim Joplin's rags as 'entirely new'. We will encounter these two words many times in ensuing chapters of the present book. They are problematic because, strictly speaking, for the entirety of a thing to be new there can be no frame of reference. How, then, could *any* music be entirely new? Framed as music, its status as absolute novelty disperses. This is not to say that there was nothing new about, to use the subject at hand, ragtime music. The point, rather, is that the novelty of new things presents itself within a context which can never be *entirely* free of pre-existing frameworks ('the old', presumably – a rather unsatisfactory catch-all term for the history of everything up to but not including this supposed arrival of 'the entirely new', but let us pass over this issue for the time being).

Peter Gammond has summed up the basic problem nicely: 'As for ragtime – nothing ever comes completely out of the blue and it must have been created from existing materials.'⁴⁰

For Gammond, 'there is no great mystery as to where ragtime's melodic and rhythmic characteristics came from': the obvious source, he asserts, was 'the traditional folk music of the slave plantation... which had been printed as the popular and minstrel songs of Negro composers... in the decades of the nineteenth century before the rise of ragtime.'⁴¹ Thus 'Probably long before Joplin... there were itinerant Negro pianists and other instrumentalists playing a similar music', in the South at least.⁴² In fact, there is at least some room for debate

⁴⁰ Gammond, *Scott*, p.19.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.21.

⁴² *Ibid*.

here. Edward Berlin has pointed to the notated detail of ragtime/pre-ragtime music and the claims of a link between ragtime and ‘patting juba’, concluding that the evidence of a ‘literal’ link to Negro traditions is ‘slight’; for him, the link indicated by a famous statement of Joplin’s (‘There has been ragtime music in America ever since the Negro race has been here’) is merely a ‘poetic’ truth.⁴³ Berlin is eager to draw our attention to ‘notational similarities’ between Latin American dance music and ragtime, recognisable by ‘those more willing to grant an innovative role to Spanish culture than to African-American’.⁴⁴ In the end, though, he declares that ragtime and Latin American dance music are ‘distinct strains with essentially separate developments’; for Berlin, the novelty of ragtime significantly supersedes the kind of inheritances Gammond wishes to claim.⁴⁵

What is at stake here? More, perhaps, than meets the eye. If Gammond is correct, most of what ragtime delivered had anterior roots. His enumeration of the sources is impressively systematic. Contra Berlin, he suggests that ragtime-like syncopations *can* be observed within notated pieces from the mid-1880s onwards, persuasively directing us towards Louis Moreau Gottschalk’s efforts at notating banjo music in *The Banjo* (1853); on the basis of this, he suggests that ‘ragtime of a kind had been around since Gottschalk’s time’.⁴⁶ With good reason, he also points out the common AABBACDD rondo form of classic ragtime ‘is

⁴³ Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp.22-3. Insofar as the ‘evidence’ of notation goes, Berlin’s argument stands up; this alone, however, does not necessarily disprove the link which Joplin and others have suggested.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.115.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.117.

⁴⁶ Gammond, *Scott*, p.39. Berlin feels that this is not the case: for him, Gottschalk’s music is ‘*apparently* derived from a nonnotated [sic] folk music, but it does not really seem that this music *is* the direct ancestor of ragtime’, Berlin, *Ragtime*, p.115, emphasis added.

essentially the scheme of most European and American marches’, an inheritance which is amplified by the frequent compositional decision to modulate to the subdominant in the C section (the ‘trio’ section, that is).⁴⁷ Gammond naturally draws our attention to the ‘cakewalk’ as an antecedent of ragtime which had been in vogue since 1880 (whereas Tom Turpin’s *Harlem Rag* – generally claimed as the first published rag – was only issued in 1897).⁴⁸ Furthermore, ‘Immensely popular songs of the 1850s and 60s’ may well have lain ‘on top of the Joplin parlour piano’ and in any case ‘there is no questioning that songs published as early as the 1830s – such as *Turkey in the Straw...* – were phrased and accented in a manner that clearly shows them to be ancestors of ragtime’.⁴⁹ With good reason Gammond also directs us towards the late nineteenth century compositions of John Philip Sousa: readers thinking themselves unfamiliar with Sousa’s work might bring to mind ‘The Liberty Bell’ (used as the theme tune to *Monty Python*); the similarity between Joplin’s melodic style and Sousa’s witty use of flattened fifths and comical juxtaposition of minor and major thirds should be self-evident to the musically-alert listener.

Above all, Gammond differs from Berlin in his insistence that both ragtime and jazz utilise a rhythmically-derived ‘sense of drive and urgency’, elements of which ‘we can clearly hear in African music of all kinds’.⁵⁰ It all goes back to Africa, he seems to claim. ‘Looked at in isolation’, Gammond suggests, ‘Joplin’s ragtime writing may seem like a pure river of music flowing through a featureless plain’ yet in fact ‘this is an entirely wrong impression, leading us to the conclusion that Joplin might well have invented, developed and ended the ragtime

⁴⁷ Gammond, *Scott*, p.22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp.38-9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.33, p.53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.52.

era all on his own'.⁵¹ Such a claim would be 'very far from the truth', he insists, because 'hundreds of composers, musicians and entertainers contributed to its beginnings. Joplin was isolated only by his superior genius.'⁵² Gammond is unequivocal as regards Joplin's superior 'originality' over and above 'the published work of his contemporaries' – to a problematic extent, indeed, given that Joplin's skill may have been primarily in *notating* piano licks and rhythmic effects whilst the 'genius' of *composing* these musical elements may have been owned by others.⁵³ In any case, though, he works to puncture the idea of Joplin as a heroic genius. Berlin also challenges 'speculations about the origins of ragtime [which have] often treated the subject as if it were a completely new, unprecedented phenomenon'.⁵⁴ As we have seen above, though, the latter scholar simultaneously combats the idea that ragtime has any direct musical connection to Africa and the African American 'Negro' folk music of the nineteenth century.

Gammond and Berlin's positions are not entirely mutually contradictory, then. (Both, we should note, prioritise notated examples to a problematic extent: the absence of syncopation in notated music prior to some particular date by no means conclusively proves that syncopation was actually absent from performance and improvised composition prior to that date; indeed, recourse to notation gives only a limited view of likely developments in late-nineteenth century African-American piano playing.) Nevertheless, I suggest we can symbolically bring them face to face in order to explore theoretical tensions between the idea of originality and novelty (which are not quite the same, of course, but tend to be linked), on

⁵¹ Ibid, p.83.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, p.22.

⁵⁴ Berlin, *Ragtime*, p.99.

the one hand, and inheritance from a tradition, on the other. For Berlin, ‘the *Maple Leaf Rag* was a singular case. No other piano rag, by Joplin or anyone else, repeated its unique success.’⁵⁵ As we have seen, Gammond too acknowledges Joplin’s compositional superiority but at the same time wants to emphasise the amount which ragtime composers, Scott Joplin included, inherited from anterior sources. How important is this question? In a sense, it relates to the question as to whether or not this composer was really a ‘king’. Given the general agreement (at least amongst white scholars of the 1970s) that his compositional work was superior, perhaps he was; but should musical excellence necessarily endow the creator of the music with, say, riches commensurate with their degree of musical superiority? Put this way, the idea seems rather ridiculous: how on earth, for example, could we determine how much more money Scott Joplin should have earned relative to, say, his friend Tom Turpin? Should we really attempt to quantify aesthetic value and remunerate musicians accordingly? Or could we perhaps just enjoy the music but try not to lionise the creator of it?

These questions may seem a little odd given that Joplin made so little profit from his music in any case. Surely, though, he was far from the only son of a slave within the period in question who faced destitution. (We can also note that the publishing deal he struck with Stark was favourable by the standards of the day.⁵⁶) Isn’t the question, then, not as to why the king lived and died in near poverty but, rather, why a whole set of people should have faced this fate in the decades after the eventual abolition of slavery in the US? We can add that African Americans have fared poorly across the century or so since Joplin’s death. Isn’t this the real crime? There is no question that ragtime music faced prejudices which were often overtly racist. Susan Curtis draws our attention to numerous instances, such as the complaint that

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.75.

⁵⁶ Berlin, *King*, p.56.

ragtime ‘contained the same aesthetic elements “as that in the monstrous recurring rhythmic chant of barbarous races”’, for example.⁵⁷ Of course we should riposte such arguments by pointing to the musical subtlety and immense interest the music holds for the sympathetic listener; and, also, by noting that repetitive (ie. ‘recurring’) rhythms are far from a monstrosity to the appropriately attuned ear (we will return to the pleasures involved in repetitious music in later chapters). In any case, though, we must note that racism in the 1890s and early twentieth century went well beyond snide descriptions of African American art as being ‘monstrous’ and ‘barbarous’: this is, in other words, ‘the tip of the iceberg’; the slanderous choice of words is far from being acceptable, of course, but racism gets much worse than this.

Come the glorious day (as Communists used to say), will we still have kings? One assumes otherwise. That given, perhaps we should view the frequently racist denigration of ragtime as a function of racism in society but add that, in principle, anyone’s creativity should be valued and respected. This points us towards issues around relativism and the fantasies of an absolute equality; issues which I will deal with later in the book. For now, any reader with limited knowledge of the area of music under discussion would do well, I suggest, to have a quick listen to the *Maple Leaf Rag* and then, for comparison, to check out Tom Turpin’s *Harlem Rag* (easily done, in the twenty first century, thanks to the likes of Youtube). The middle sections of the latter piece are markedly similar to fragments within the former, we can note. Joplin and Turpin were friends, and it is fair to guess that the fragmentary similarities resulted from a degree of ‘comparing notes’ which the pair must have undertaken – or perhaps from a resource of piano ‘licks’ which were common property within the emergent ragtime style. This, I would suggest, is precisely how new directions in popular

⁵⁷ Curtis, *Dancing*, p.112.

music – indeed in cultures generally – normally evolve: the development is essentially additive, with different practitioners ‘pushing the envelope’ such that novel possibilities gradually emerge.

There is no need for us to question the outstanding tidiness and salient tastefulness with which Scott Joplin sculpted the *Maple Leaf Rag*: the runaway sales of the sheet testify to its special appeal, as does a seemingly unanimous affirmation of its greatness by critics and scholars. We need to also bear in mind David Jasen and Trebor Jay Titchenor’s assessment, however: the piece ‘was *new for its time*’.⁵⁸ Curtis is in broad agreement: ‘it must be remembered that syncopation was not brand new in the 1890s. It had been a part of African American music for generations.’⁵⁹ The *Maple Leaf Rag* did not simply appear in a flash, then, with some magical separation from the flow of cultural history; and yet it delivered a sound which many listeners (middle class whites, in particular) hadn’t encountered before. Melodically and harmonically, one can hear hints of the jazz style which would develop in the decades after ragtime: for example, the ostentatious juxtaposition of minor and major thirds in the opening phrases of *The Entertainer* (1901). For Gammond, ragtime is ‘an ingredient of most subsequent jazz and popular music’.⁶⁰ Berlin insists that ragtime remained ‘within the safe, recognisable comforts of conventional popular melody’: a disputable claim given the frequently ostentatious positioning of ‘passing notes’ in some of Joplin’s work, I would suggest, but Berlin is at least confident of ragtime’s rhythmical innovation.⁶¹

⁵⁸ David A. Jasen and Trebor Jay Titchenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p.5, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Curtis, *Dancing*, p.173.

⁶⁰ Gammond, *Scott*, p.13.

⁶¹ Berlin, *Ragtime*, p.89. Berlin’s is the most detailed analysis of syncopation in ragtime of which I am aware.

By all accounts, then, the syncopation of African American-derived musics (of which what became known as ‘ragtime’ certainly forms an important example) brought something rhythmically novel to the larger field of music. It is not the case that nothing remotely like the steady left hand with interruptive syncopations from the right hand had ever been seen before: Richard Middleton’s discussion of the piano arrangement of Liszt’s *Harmonies Poétiques*, for example, points out that ‘You’d expect the stresses in the two hands to coincide; but they don’t. The right hand notes fall *between* the beat states by the left hand.’⁶² Interestingly, Middleton adds that it is ‘as if Liszt is improvising rather than following a normal rhythmic scheme’. Does this combination of improvisation and ambidextrous rhythm render Liszt as something of a ‘jazzier’, *avant la lettre*? Certainly not, despite Eubie Blake’s (noted African-American composer and pianist, born in 1883) assertion that ‘Anything that is syncopated is basically ragtime. I don’t care whether it’s Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody* or Tchaikovsky’: to label all syncopation appearing anywhere as ragtime would be excessive.⁶³ Equally we can take James P. Johnston’s indication that ‘Once I used Liszt’s *Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase* as an introduction to a stomp’ as an example of the fairly widespread practice of ‘ragging the classics’ rather than a declaration that Liszt and stomping equate to each other.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, these citations are useful for us to keep in mind if we want to get a feel for the fact that, whilst there was something very new about ragtime music, its arrival was conditionalised to a significant extent by other musical (and socio-political) developments which arose in the nineteenth century. Was ragtime valuable for the cultural, social, economic and political empowerment of African Americans? John Stark, the white publisher, made far more money from the *Maple Leaf Rag* than its composer did (even if

⁶² Middleton, *From Liszt*, p.29.

⁶³ Gammond, *Scott*, p.7.

⁶⁴ Berlin, *Ragtime*, p.67.

Joplin had a decent deal by the standards of the day) and although ragtime won the admiration of more than one ‘serious’ (that is, white and European-orientated) composer, slurs upon it as a ‘ragweed of music’ and ‘a poison that destroys the musical tastes of the young’ were commonplace at the time.⁶⁵ Dare we say that African American emancipation, which we must continue to demand in the twenty first century, will require a good deal more than simply allowing them to provide entertainment for their former masters? We can at least note that an older generation were dubious as to the value of this music at the time: for example, Eubie Blake has explained that ‘My mother was very religious and hated ragtime like all the high-class Negroes. I was sorry that they didn’t understand it.’ In a sense, indeed, ragtime was new primarily from a white American and European point of view: for the ‘high-class Negroes’, the music may even had the taint of the bad old days of slavery which, presumably, they wished to put firmly behind them.⁶⁶

Don’t Dilly Dally on the Way

In the early nineteenth century, the experiences and concerns of the new industrial proletariat received limited coverage within the lyrics of popular songs. Of course songs had been used for centuries to mock figures of authority and, to a large extent, music hall songs from the middle of the century onwards provided ‘the literary successor to the parson, the major

⁶⁵ Preston, *Scott*, p.144.

⁶⁶ Berlin, *Ragtime*, p.67. Perhaps, of course, the ‘religious’ objection of Blake’s mother was more to do with the perceived secular character of the music rather than being to do with anything specifically related to the music itself, nor its implication of the era of slavery. I would suggest, though, that the reference to ‘high class Negroes’ reflects Blake’s personal impression of a certain ‘aspirant’ ambition amongst the milieu under discussion.

source of mockery in earlier pamphlets and booklets'.⁶⁷ However, a proletarian class which the industrial revolution had created were experiencing very different lifestyles compared with that of pre-industrial congregations of 'the lower orders'; and naturally enough, it seems, the music changed as the social arrangement was transformed. To this extent, music hall is extremely interesting: it seems to give us a strong indication of working class preoccupations and concerns at a time when it is generally agreed that the condition of the urban proletariat was wretched. 'Champagne Charlie' from 1866 is probably as good an example as any: on the surface, the song celebrates the 'bling' (to use a modern term) of the 'flash harry' (to use a slightly older one) aspirant man about town; in the mass sing-along sessions of the mid-nineteenth century music halls, however, it is fair to say that bourgeois wealth was in short supply. Quite the contrary, indeed: Dagmar Kift has stated firmly that 'in the early decades [music halls] catered predominately to working-class audiences of both sexes' although a minority lower middle class constituency also could always be found in the halls and, by the last years of the century, 'music halls developed into variety theatres catering to all classes of society'.⁶⁸

There is no question that something novel was occurring here. For example, 'If It Wasn't for the 'Ouses in Between' (1894) required the built up and inadequate housing in which the industrial proletariat of the day dwelled in order for the lyrics to have been written in the first place. The bitter irony of the song's suggestion that 'you'd think you're in Kent, or at Epsom' is predicated upon the fact that the life which the bulk of the music hall audience were experiencing was far from being 'very pretty'; it is obviously the case, therefore, that a song

⁶⁷ Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.38.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.2.

like this could not have been written prior to the social developments which are (sarcastically) described in the song. As always, that said, there is a grave danger of overstating the case. For example, D. F. Cheshire has cautioned against ‘occasionally misleading’ accounts which ‘tend to treat the Victorian and Edwardian music hall as though it was a unique form of entertainment rather than the organisation of long-established kinds of performance and performer for financial gain by parties other than the performers themselves’.⁶⁹ Music hall was not *entirely* new, then: indeed, Peter van der Merwe suggests that the process through which ‘the classical tradition gradually pulled away from a mass of middle- and lowbrow music’ begins around the 1790s. This bifurcation between ‘classical’ music and the emergent popular style (‘parlour music’, as van der Merwe calls it) was doubtless vital for the later development of music hall; but, that said, van der Merwe asserts with convincing authority that ‘the divorce... was a very gradual affair’.⁷⁰

Music hall emerged in a particular context, then: a moment in which classical and popular musics were increasingly felt to be separate and a country (Britain) which had developed an industrial capitalist system faster and more overwhelmingly than any other. This music was unequivocally ‘for’ the working class, in the sense that the lyrics typically addressed proletarian concerns and experiences but also with regards to musical structure which normally involved easily-learned melodies (especially within the chorus, of course) and comfortably familiar harmonic designs (more on this shortly). Music hall was not always ‘by’ the working class, but certain key songwriters – Joseph Tabrar, Joe Wilson and many others –

⁶⁹ D. F. Cheshire, *Music Hall in Britain* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1974), p.9.

⁷⁰ Van der Merwe, Peter, *Origins of the Popular Style: The Antecedents of Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p.17, p.18.

were of ‘working-class origin’.⁷¹ According to Anthony Bennett, it differed from the popular music of the early nineteenth century because the latter ‘simply had no style of its own’. Gradually, however, the setting of new words to old tunes was superseded by the creation of novel musical elements. That said, we should be cautious as regards this degree of newness: on Bennett’s view, ‘*overall* novelty of style’ was more important than and ‘precluded the need for any great differentiation of individual songs either by subject matter or style’; tricks such as the use of the dominant in preparation for the chorus (typically in combination with a pregnant pause to allow the audience to get ready to join in) were overwhelmingly common.⁷² Bennett suggests that the ‘swell song’ was ‘perhaps the one really new type of song pioneered in the halls’.⁷³ The music hall style was essentially standardised by the 1880s with mere ‘confirmation and extension of the characteristics’ but no ‘new departures’ during the 1890s.⁷⁴

This is a fairly strong contrast to the emergence of ragtime: where the latter was perceived as being musically novel, with any ‘political’ implications deriving largely from the socio-economic and ‘racial’ position of the leading writers of the music, music hall offered markedly familiar-sounding songs but, crucially for our purposes, with lyrics which focussed heavily upon the new socio-economic situation of the bulk of the audience. This is not to say, however, that all or even most music hall songs accounted for the need not to ‘dilly dally’

⁷¹ For detail on Tabrar, see Anthony Bennett, ‘Music in the Halls’ in J. S. Bratton, *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1986), pp.1-22: 9. For a provocative discussion of the extent to which Joe Wilson can be identified as working class, see Dave Harker, ‘“Comic Dialectical Singer” or Class Traitor?’, pp.92-110 in the same collection.

⁷² Bennett, ‘Music’, p.8, emphasis retained; p.12.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p.16.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pp.20-1.

when doing a ‘moonlight flit’ from an exploitative landlord (‘My Old Man Said Follow the Van’) and such like: sentimental material has never gone out of fashion in the popular music field, and music hall songwriters churned out countless trivial pieces such as ‘Why am I Always the Bridesmaid?’ Nevertheless, a remarkable quantity of music hall songs explored themes around poverty, escapism (primarily through drinking, but also through a fantasy/parody of being a ‘toff’) and the lampooning of authority figures.

Amongst the latter song-type, Kift has suggested that ‘the personalisation of the general and the abstract’ was of particular importance: ‘Songs did not deal with the police but with the policeman; not with war but with soldiers; not with work but with workers.’⁷⁵ I am happy to defer to Kift’s evidently broad knowledge of the field of music hall songs and yet I would like to pose a small challenge to this assertion based upon a close reading of a particular song with which I am familiar and which seems to me to cast doubt on the absolute applicability of this claim. The song in question is ‘Ask a P’liceman’ (1889), written by E.W. Rogers and A. E. Durandeu. One must immediately concede to Kift that the title deals with a singular policeman. However, I feel that overall it represents an attempt to ‘deal’ with the police *in toto* and not just to lampoon some individual policeman.

In the song’s first verse, for example, the target is specifically the ‘force’ and not at all a sole character: ‘*their* valour is unquestioned and *they’re* noted for *their* feats’, the sarcastic lyrics argue. Due to their erudition, ‘anything you wish to know, they’ll tell you with a grin’; the truth is, indeed, that ‘each one of them is a complete Enquire Within’, the verse concludes. For this reason, we are advised in the chorus that ‘If you wanna know the time – ask a P’liceman’: due to their high-ranking social status, ‘every member of the force has a watch and chain, of course’. This is in keeping with Kift’s idea that ‘People who attempted to

⁷⁵ Kift, *The Victorian*, p.39.

disguise or deny their social background were particular figures of fun in the halls': the pocket watch-carrying policeman is a social climber and perhaps even a class traitor we might say.⁷⁶

Invoking the class war with regard to this song might seem a bit dubious: it is, after all, just a bit of fun, isn't it? I would agree that the song is hilarious; but also, it seems to me, the lyrics are not only rather too acerbic to be accounted as mere ribaldry but also too systematic in their mockery: one by one, the responsibilities of the police are ridiculed. In verse two, for example, we are advised that 'If drink you want and pubs are shut, go to the man in blue – say you're thirsty and good natured and he'll show you what to do'. Correspondingly, the attached chorus suggests that 'If you want to get a drink – ask a p'liceman'; as an accomplice of illicit out-of-hours publicans, 'he'll produce the flowing pot if the pubs are shut or not'. The interpellation of the audience becomes intriguing in the third verse: 'If your servant suddenly should leave her cosy place', you might ask a policeman for help; the assumption, in other words, is that the audience which is being interpellated is of the moneyed classes who can hire servants. There can be little doubt, that said, that a symbolic 'knowing wink' is in place here: Rogers and Durandean can hardly have been under the impression that the average attendee of the music hall in 1899 could afford to keep servants. Rather, the lyric is tied up with the conceit found in songs such as 'Champagne Charlie' amongst many others: 'of course, we're all stinking rich aren't we?', the song seems to hail out at this point. In any case, the policeman proves untrustworthy when you 'pass through regions queer', we discover in the chorus: 'they say with "red" [a soldier] she flew' but it is more likely that it was the 'blue', the song suggests.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

The fourth verse, meanwhile, encourages us to see the police as cowards: ‘a bobby in a row’ will aid you ‘if you’re getting very stout’ because he can be your ‘trainer’: ‘watch a bobby in a fight’ and soon he’ll be ‘out of sight’; ‘for advice on rapid flight’, indeed, one must ‘ask a p’liceman’. The fifth and final verse is perhaps the most damning indictment of the ‘noble band that safely guard our streets’: some words of advice should you need a friend to guard your house and your wife whilst on a trip away from home. The kiss off lines (‘truth and honour’, it transpires, are ‘written on his manly face’ – and yet ‘when you’re gone he’ll mind your place’) complete the picture of a corrupt, pseudo-bourgeois, cowardly philanderer. I would argue, furthermore, that this résumé is at least implied to apply to the police as a whole (recall, for example, that we are told that ‘*each* one of them’ is a ‘complete Enquire Within’, ie. empty-headed).

Kift may overstate her case somewhat, then, yet she is of course right to query the extent of political significance within this music; and her research into the process by which ‘music-hall proprietors were more or less forced into the arms of the Tories’ is also highly interesting for our purposes.⁷⁷ It is fair to say, on balance, that the ‘political’ dimension of music hall – the preoccupation with working class life, the nods towards class antagonism and so on – was limited by a range of factors not least of which were, on the one hand, the economic substructure upon which this musical culture was erected and, on the other, the fact that music hall was designed as entertainment, not agitation. So, we shouldn’t be too surprised that music hall could only go so far and no further towards unpicking the new social conditions which had arisen in nineteenth century Britain: in many ways it is surprising how

⁷⁷ Kift, *The Victorian*, p.43. She adds that in the early twentieth century ‘a rapid decline of the music hall as a political commentator’ brought an overall ‘withdrawal from major public concerns’, p.45.

risqué many of the songs were, given the (famously repressive) Victorian social context in which they arose.

What might disappoint the modern ear, that said, is the rhythmic and harmonic reserve of much of the music: despite nods and winks and flashes of undergarments from time to time, this music really wasn't too 'sexy' compared with the developments in African-American popular music during the same approximate period. I want to make some observations about this coldness: from where does the musical chill come? For the purpose of discussion, let us consider the song 'Show Me The Way to go Home' (1925, credited to Irving King).⁷⁸ Given the date of composition, one might imagine that the song would show some influence from musical developments across the Atlantic: after all, according to Richard Anthony Baker, 'The craze for ragtime, the basis of all jazz, swept in from the United States during 1912' and, by the mid-1920s such rhythmically-exciting music must surely have been known across Britain.⁷⁹ However, 'Show Me the Way' shows very few signs of any such influence: granted, the quavers are lightly swung in any normal rendition of the piece and the opening melodic line (the titular line with which it is hoped that most readers will be familiar) switches in a slightly Joplin-esque manner between a major and minor third.⁸⁰ Aside from

⁷⁸ *Pub Favourites No. 5* (London: Campbell Connelly, 1978), p.32.

⁷⁹ Richard Anthony Baker, *British Music Hall: An Illustrated History* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2005), p.275.

Baker's claim is partly erroneous, of course: ragtime may have pre-dated be-bop, for example, but it could hardly be claimed as the 'basis' of the latter style in any serious sense. His larger point, though, is hard to dispute: African-American music was mushrooming in popularity within the UK and beyond during the 1920s.

⁸⁰ The italicised words offer a minor third, whereas the rest of the line (excepting the closing word 'home', in bold here, which drops to the tonic note) is all upon a major third: 'show me *the way to go* **home**'; the juxtaposition of minor and major thirds makes the line sound suitably 'drunk', of course. (It is possible to describe what I am calling a minor third as a sharp second, one ought to acknowledge; I personally do not hear

this, however, the song is little if at all different from the structure typical to music hall songs composed some fifty or sixty years earlier: it sets out in the tonic position, briefly moves to the sub-dominant and then back to the tonic, utilises a ‘circle of fifths’ progression to move away from and then back to the tonic (I-vi-II7-V7-I), very briefly implies a (very comfortable) modulation to the relative minor via a prominent major mediant chord (III7) on the last word of the third line (‘Wherever I may roam, on land or sea or *foam*’) before using a dominant seventh chord to return to the tonic, repeating once more the circle of fifths pattern and concluding, unremarkably, upon the tonic.

This is not an exciting song, for its time and context: rather, it is something of an elementary jigsaw puzzle, I would argue. That said, the song has endured for nearly a hundred years (I am confident that it still gets hummed around pub closing time by a certain age and type of drinker, at least within the UK). The lack of novelty, here, does not seem to have eradicated the appeal of a ‘good old song’, then. There is every reason to be sceptical about the political outcome of songs which lionise alcohol consumption, of course (‘I had a little drink about an hour ago...’); we might add, though, that the celebration of ale probably goes back as far as popular song itself and, furthermore, politically-dubious songs about intoxication show no sign of going out of fashion. Overall, I am inclined to agree with Pete Bailey that music hall ‘did indeed contribute to the making of the modern consumer’.⁸¹ However, the trouble with consumers (from a strictly conservative point of view) is that they tend to demand novelty: consequently, music hall became ‘unacceptable to the post-war generation [who were]

it as such however and, in any case, such a question seems to me purely scholastic: the ‘drunk’ feel is audibly notable no matter what enharmonic description is applied.)

⁸¹ Peter Bailey, *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), p.xviii.

looking for something completely new and more in tune with modern times'.⁸² The received wisdom (with which I hold no dispute) seems to suggest that the rise of cinema destroyed the music halls. By the 30s, that said, certain music hall songs had been in circulation for close to a century: perhaps it was inevitable, therefore, that music would develop in order to keep up with the changing times. We can doubt, nevertheless, whether the changes to working class culture during the twentieth century were all of benefit to that class; if not, perhaps the comfortable familiarity of those old Victorian-era songs is less of a crime than it might have appeared to be in the 1920 and 30s.

Gone, Gone, Gone

To leap from a discussion of formative popular music such as ragtime and music hall straight to the emergence of 'rock'n'roll' in the 1950s is rather like conjoining a discussion of the French revolution of 1789 to an analysis of the Russian revolution of 1917: the leap misses rather a large number of important individuals, ideas and events. Ultimately, however, the leap is excusable to the extent that there will always be a gap – a 'leap of faith', for the reader, perhaps – between what we can say about one historical moment and the extent to which we can compare it with some other moment: as Dick Bradley puts it, in a challenge to the normal assumption that 1960s 'Beat-boom' music links neatly to the rise of rock'n'roll in the 1950s, 'there is an element of *myth* in the way rock histories skip from one commercial peak to another, from one "great artist" to another, ignoring almost totally the social roots of both the music making and the listening, which ought to be among their objects of study'.⁸³ Such applies even if the two moments were to occur on the same day in the same town, one

⁸² Cheshire, *Music*, p.10.

⁸³ Dick Bradley, *Understanding Rock'n'Roll: Popular Music in Britain 1955-1964* (Buckingham: Open University, 1992), p.12, emphasis retained.

might want to add: it certainly applies to the gulf between late Victorian popular music and the country/blues hybrid music which emerged in the mid-1950s under the name rock'n'roll.

We should acknowledge, straight off, that a track like Carl Perkins' 'Gone, Gone, Gone' (issued on Sam Phillips' Sun label in Autumn 1955, also home to Elvis Presley's earliest recordings, of course) was markedly new in a popular music context. Perkins guitar style, despite numerous stylistic inheritances from 'country' style playing, was highly distinctive. The bathing of the sound in 'slap-back' echo, even if it was enabled by new technology, gave a remarkably novel ambience to the sound. The opening vocal holler, followed by a chin-to-the-chest style of singing (possibly imitated from Perkins' label-mate Elvis Presley) was also not something one heard in the mainstream popular music of the day. Overall, the record would not have been imaginable in, say, 1934.

'Fifties' rock'n'roll was a new thing, then; many listeners had not heard music quite like this before. That said, it is easy – and a journalistic commonplace – to overstate the case, I want to argue. Let us begin with the mythic/heroic account which places Elvis as the Messianic creator of something *entirely* new. For this purpose, Greil Marcus is without question the first writer to whom we should turn: on his view, Elvis is 'no longer reaching for the past' when he 'takes his stand'; rather, he and his audience are 'responding to something completely new'.⁸⁴ Marcus is unequivocal about the ahistoric power of Elvis: 'Historical forces might explain the Civil War, but they don't account for Lincoln; they don't explain Elvis any more

⁸⁴ Marcus, Greil, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music* (New York: Dutton and Co., 1976), p.145. We should acknowledge that this passage relates to Elvis's famous 1968 'Comeback' TV special, not his first flush of fame; that said, it would be very hard to deny that such is Marcus's general position on the emergence of Elvis.

than they explain Little Peggy March.⁸⁵ In Marcus's view 'one young man like Elvis could break through a world as hard as Hank Williams', and invent a new one to replace it'.⁸⁶ This magical power derives from 'the genius of his singing, an ease and intensity that has no parallel in American music'.⁸⁷ Elvis, it seems, always arrives from nowhere, bringing the news at the same time as he relies upon no musical parallel: ' "I heard the news", Elvis would sing in "Good Rockin' Tonight" – but he was the news'; this newsflash, furthermore, 'can return something new each time you listen to it'.⁸⁸ Is there any music which one feels *exactly the same* about every single time one listens to it, though? And isn't Robin Thicke bringing us some news (whether we like it or not) about our society and its sexist/rapist appetites when he offers up a song like 'Blurred Lines'?⁸⁹

There is something rather unfair in critiquing such weaknesses in Marcus's style of argument. He is certainly aware of the basic issue himself: 'Any musicologist, neatly tracing the development of the music, can tell us that the music did not come out of nowhere. But it sounded like it did.'⁹⁰ This broadly phenomenological argument feels powerful ('you squares who want to talk about the musical content just don't get it', he seems to be saying; an argument I wouldn't necessarily disagree with up to a point but then, why write a non-fiction book if you can't support what you are saying with facts?). As with ragtime, though, we need to ask: to *whom* did it sound like it came out of nowhere? If Louis Jordan was justified in complaining that 'rockn'roll was just a white imitation, a white adaptation of Negro rhythm

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.147.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.158.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.163.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.169.

⁸⁹ Robin Thicke, *Blurred Lines* (Interscope), 2013

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.18.

and blues’, as Glenn Altschuler has suggested he largely is, the answer would seem to be self-evident: rock’n’roll brought an identifiably ‘black’ sound to a ‘white’ audience. For the latter constituency, the sound appears to have been received as markedly novel. In fact, however, the twelve bar blues structure, ‘vamping’ the sixth on a major triad, the ostentatious placement of minor thirds upon major chords and even the electric guitar had all appeared in pop before the rock’n’roll era – aside from the electric guitar, indeed, these elements were apparent in the mainstream popular music of the late 1930s.⁹¹

Since Marcus has already conceded the point that the music was *not* entirely new, we should avoid wasting words here. However, I want to bring some nuance to the argument at hand and even foreshadow the core ideas of Alain Badiou which we will encounter later in the book. Let’s drop ‘the King’ (Elvis) for a moment, then, and consider another (literally, in this case) towering figure of fifties rock’n’roll: Little Richard. For Marcus, Richard was/is ‘The one who broke rules, created a form; the one who gave shape to a vitality that wailed silently in each of us until he found a voice for it.’⁹² Clearly the ‘us’ in question does not stretch to, say, members of the Ku Klux Klan. However, I would argue that this ‘us’ *might* include many African-Americans as well as, obviously, white youths of the day such as Marcus himself. In short, race music was ‘inexistent’, a music from the void (as Badiou might say), relative to the mainstream of pre-War popular music in the USA, according to Charlie Gillett.⁹³ Slowly this situation changed with the rise of ‘r’n’b’, and then rapidly with the rise of ‘r’n’r’ (for convenience, I shall use these abbreviations henceforth). Why? For Altschuler,

⁹¹ Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock’n’Roll Changed America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.23.

⁹² Marcus, *Mystery*, p.4.

⁹³ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock’n’Roll* (London: Souvenir Press, 1970), p.10.

the answer is straightforward: rock'n'roll 'generated sound and fury'.⁹⁴ One need not consult David Hume, however, to see that this assumption of cause and effect is not in fact a *necessary* conclusion in the strict sense. Could it not be, rather, that there was 'fury' in the US, the UK, in the capitalist West at large, and that *consequent to the existence of this hard-to-voice fury* (the existence of rebels who lacked a cause, that is) rock'n'roll *met* an inchoate demand rather than instigating or generating it? Alternatively (or additionally, perhaps), might an increased quantity of disposable income and leisure time amongst the young have generated a desire for a new youth music? Altschuler may have placed the cart before the horse, then; and I want to add that *if* the furious but inchoate demand for social change pre-dated the rise of rock'n'roll, is it not possible that this subliminal urge was common to a mass constituency of youth irrespective of their 'race'?

I would challenge the immediate dismissal of this idea. However, it is certainly important not to conveniently sidestep the fact that skin colour is pivotal for the sense of musical novelty which emerged during the period in question. Gillett is typically astute, here: 'When [DJ Alan Freed] first used the term "rock'n'roll", he was applying it to music that already existed under another name, "rhythm and blues". But the change in name induced a change in the music itself.'⁹⁵ This change resulted from the fact that 'this music was being directed at white listeners, but then, as the people producing the music became conscious of their new audience, they changed the character of the music'. Dick Bradley has somewhat denigrated Gillett's ability to account for this difference beyond a weak 'descriptive-evaluative' model.⁹⁶ I would suggest, though, that his criticisms are not always well-founded: the idea that post-

⁹⁴ Altschuler, *All*, p.6.

⁹⁵ Gillett, *The Sound*, pp.21-2.

⁹⁶ Bradley, *Understanding*, pp.4-5.

War r'n'b 'contradicted' the sonic character of mainstream popular music of the period is hardly difficult to ascertain from a comparison of r'n'b with the leading singers of the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁹⁷ What *is* debatable is whether r'n'r *significantly* changed the r'n'b musical template. Take Wynonie Harris's r'n'b version of 'Good Rockin' Tonight' from 1948: the arpeggiated bass line (replete with flat sevenths on the sub-dominant chord), the 'twelve bar blues' structure, the limited range of melodic shape, the 'shout-and-fall' vocal style, the heavy emphasis upon the backbeat (emphasised, here, with handclaps), the regular references to 'rockin'', 'jumpin'', 'stompin'' – all the fundamentals of r'n'r, save the loud electric guitar, are already in place.⁹⁸ Given, though, Chuck Berry's stated 'intention to hold both the black and white clientele by voicing the different songs in their customary tongues', it is certainly fair to acknowledge that at least some modifications to the sound of r'n'b were delivered by r'n'r.⁹⁹

How new, in the 1940s context, was the twelve bar blues structure used in pieces such as 'Good Rockin' Tonight'? On balance, I am in broad agreement with Pete van der Merwe's suggestion that, in the twentieth century overall, 'this form was something completely new in music' given its 'consciously assymetrical' tripartite structure (AAB, that is) which,

⁹⁷ Gillett, *The Sound*, p.10. One example of Bradley's unfair treatment of Gillett would be the claim that the latter asserts that 'Elvis Presley represented adult sexuality... but nowhere is this explained or analysed', *Understanding*, p.15. In fact, we read of Elvis's 'use of the guitar as a stage prop... for sexual provocation, as he ground the guitar against his body or pointed it suggestively out at the audience', Gillett, *The Sound*, pp.134-5. In any case, one would think that the leg-shaking performance of 'Elvis the Pelvis' for an audience of young girls is hardly requiring of lengthy explanation or analysis: admittedly a *musical* sexual content would be highly questionable, but this does not seem to be what Bradley claims Gillett is saying in any case.

⁹⁸ Wynonie Harris, 'Good Rockin' Tonight' (King), 1948

⁹⁹ Altschuler, *All*, p.63.

nevertheless, seemed to be ‘not irregular, but on the contrary satisfyingly regular’.¹⁰⁰ I have two reservations, here, however. Firstly, van der Merwe’s use of the word ‘completely’: after all, a song such as ‘Mr. Frog’ (also known as ‘The Frog Went a-Courtin’’,¹⁰¹) had evolved into a twelve bar-like AAB structure circa 1880, as van der Merwe himself shows.¹⁰² Secondly, as regards the question as to how radically new r’n’b was in the 1940s, we can clearly see that the ‘new’ style in fact had strong roots in the nineteenth century (and beyond: ‘Mr. Frog’ derives from ‘The Frog Would a-Wooing Ride’, an English song dating back to the Jacobean period). In any case, the twelve bar was firmly established by the 1920s.¹⁰³

Rock’n’roll *was* new, though: the electric guitar playing of Elmore James, John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters might foreshadow that of Chuck Berry, for example, but they don’t sound *quite* like him. In a different way, meanwhile, country-influenced players such as Carl Perkins and Luther Perkins (no relation) brought something novel to the table despite an audible debt to, for example, the picking style of The Carter Family. Part of this novelty is technological (not only was the electrically-amplified guitar becoming more affordable, but studio techniques such as the aforementioned slapback echo were now available¹⁰⁴). Another part of r’n’r’s novelty is musical (the exceptional repetition and short duration of string bends by Berry, for example, and the general blending of country and blues which is the heart of fifties rock’n’roll and which had never been done quite like this before). A third part of the

¹⁰⁰ Merwe, *Origins*, p.216.

¹⁰¹ Tom Glazer, *A New Treasury of Folk Songs* (New York: Bantam, 1961), pp.51-2

¹⁰² Merwe, *Origins*, p.280

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p.194. The Jacobean version featured an AAAB structure rather than the blues-like AAB, we should note: nevertheless, Jacobean grassroots for what would evolve into ‘the blues’ would seem to be readily identifiable here. The twelve bar blues can be heard on countless popular recordings from the 1920s.

¹⁰⁴ ‘The studio... is really new to the 1950s’, Bradley, *Understanding*, p.15.

novelty of r'n'r is economic/socio-political (race relations, 'the baby boom' and the increasing use of the 1940s term 'teenager' in the 1950s, perhaps an un-named but nevertheless discerning fear of the bomb or hatred of capitalism – something, at least, made 'whites' want to listen to African-American musicians during the mid-1950s¹⁰⁵). The question, for our purposes, is how *important* and how *powerful* this novelty was, however. Let's return to the assertions of Greil Marcus: 'It is often said that if Elvis had not come along to set off the changes in American music and American life that followed his triumph, someone very much like him would have done the job as well'.¹⁰⁶ Marcus adds that 'there is no reason to think this is true, either in strictly musical terms, or in any broader cultural sense'. This extravagant claim is worth testing out, in both the musical and the cultural senses Marcus claims for the King. For this purpose, let us consider Carl Perkins' original version of 'Blue Suede Shoes', which he composed and issued in 1956 (selling over a million copies), and then compare it with the later (and, today, far more famous) version by Elvis Presley.¹⁰⁷

The first thing we hear, of course, are some of the most famous lyrics of the entire catalogue of popular music: 'well its one for the money...', hails Perkins, followed by the (today) instantly-recognisable answer phrase from the band. Did Perkins realise what dynamite he had, here? Possibly, for he leaves a pregnant pause before suggesting that we might count

¹⁰⁵ Must we assume that the Bikini Atoll 'controlled' explosion of Spring 1954 is a mere coincidence? Must we take the common association of rock'n'roll with Coca Cola and shiny red plastic seating in American 'diners' as an entirely uncritical affirmation of the joys of consumer spending? I would suggest otherwise: Eddie Cochrane's 'Summertime Blues', for example, does not seem to me to require a deconstructive effort in order to uncover a critique of consumer capitalism.

¹⁰⁶ Marcus, *Mystery*, p.162.

¹⁰⁷ Carl Perkins, 'Blue Suede Shoes', *The Original Carl Perkins* (Charly Records), 1980; Elvis Presley, 'Blue Suede Shoes', *Rock'n'Roll* (RCA), 1956.

‘two for the show’. That said, he may not have realised this fact: this song was in fact initially proposed to Sun records label-boss Sam Phillips as ‘a possible “B” side’.¹⁰⁸ Whatever the case, the song is exciting enough to make Perkins instruct the band (or us?) to ‘rock!’ halfway through. Following this word, he picks out a typical Carl Perkins guitar break, lavishing his trademark usage of the open top E string along with distinctively-delivered blue thirds in ‘double-stops’ alongside the fifth degree of the tonic scale (as copied on countless ‘breaks’ by George Harrison on early-to-mid period Beatles recordings). His voice sounds good: not ‘black’, not ‘hick’-ish, but clearly exciting enough to have earned himself a huge hit record.

What of Elvis’s rendition, then? The first thing we must note is that the latter takes several minute details from the original in a manner which, elsewhere in his catalogue of Sun records releases, he certainly does not: his version of ‘That’s Alright Mama’ is very different from Arthur Crudup’s original, for example. Here, by contrast, the version is very close to the original recording: for example, he calls out ‘rock it!’ in the same moment where Perkins had given the instruction to ‘rock!’ The ensuing solo by Scotty Moore, however, is rather different from Carl Perkins’: initially simpler and more declarative of the core notes in the ‘blues scale’ (ie. tonic, flat seventh and flat 3rd), Moore’s playing becomes extremely busy halfway through the break where Perkins’ approach is calmer and, to my ears, more well-finished. (Moore seems to almost stumble at the end of the break, although this has its own allure of course and the difference, I would say, is a matter of taste rather than of any ‘pure’ musical superiority.) We also have to note that Presley’s backing group ups the tempo – only slightly, but significantly enough to also up the energy levels, I would contend. The greatest difference between the two versions is the vocal delivery: even the subtly added ‘it’s a-

¹⁰⁸ Sleeve notes, *The Original Carl Perkins*.

one...’ which Elvis gives us at the top of the song and the removal of Perkins’ opening pauses gives the song a higher level of urgency. Elvis’s ‘Go, go go!’ after the guitar break, meanwhile, just seems more strident than Perkins’ ‘Go, cat, go!’ at the same juncture (although both are based on a three note repetition of the flat seventh degree of the tonic scale).

Elvis is a bit nicer to look at than Carl Perkins too, I would suggest. Footage of the latter in performance, now easily accessed via the internet, shows a man who thinks it is enough to click his fingers towards the audience and nod his head slightly. Elvis’s visual impact, to say the least, is more studied and provocative. I would not suggest, therefore, that Carl Perkins would have convincingly substituted for Elvis should the latter have been wiped from history: culturally, the packet marked ‘Elvis’ seems to throb where, comparatively, Carl Perkins gives off a warm glow. That said, in the ‘strictly musical terms’ which Marcus invokes, there is no gulf here. On the contrary, there is every reason to hypothesise that, for example, the Beatles music could have developed in very much the same way that it in fact did should the group have occupied some alternative universe in which Elvis Presley, like his brother Jesse Garon, had died at Birth. For example, there are five Perkins covers amongst the Beatles recorded catalogue, and even more covers of Chuck Berry as well as, of course, McCartney’s trademark renditions of Little Richard: substantial evidence, then, that there was plenty of rock’n’roll, besides the output of Elvis, to inspire the young Liverpudlians.¹⁰⁹ And although

¹⁰⁹ The five Carl Perkins covers by the Beatles are ‘Matchbox’, *Rarities* (EMI), 1978, ‘Honey Don’t’ and ‘Everybody’s Trying to Be My Baby’, *Beatles For Sale* (EMI), 1964, and ‘Glad All Over’ and ‘Sure to Fall (In Love with You)’, *Live At The BBC* (EMI), 1994. Only two of these features lead vocals from Lennon and McCartney we can note, with Perkins’ influence upon George Harrison being far more sonically obvious. Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that the catalogue of 1950s rock’n’roll which excludes the recordings of Elvis Presley gave ample provision for the core musical ingredients we can discern within the Beatles catalogue.

there are ‘cultural’ differences between the two cases discussed above, I would find the idea that without Elvis the second half of the twentieth century would have unfolded much differently dubious in the extreme. Would one have had rock’n’roll if, say, the US had abolished the slave trade in 1807 instead of 1862? Personally, I am not at all convinced that one would. In any case, this seems to me a far more pertinent question than the proposition of some ahistoric supervallence to an individual who, observed critically, might just as well be described as a good singer who happened to be in the right place at the right time to fulfil an aspiration of Sam Phillips’ (‘If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars’, as Phillips’ employee at Sun records Marion Keisker alleged that he would frequently assert¹¹⁰). We should note, also, that Greil Marcus’s idea of Elvis’s importance is not entirely tied to musical novelty, resting instead, to a significant extent, upon the persona of the King himself: ‘Elvis is a man whose task it is to dramatize the fact of his existence; he does not have to create something new (or try, and fail), and thus test the worth of his existence, or the worth of his audience’.¹¹¹

Chapter Conclusion

When does popular music begin? The question is doubtless futile: amongst the texts consulted in this chapter, Peter van der Merwe’s citation of the 1790s as the initial bifurcation of ‘classical’ and ‘popular’ musics would be the most distant date, yet who could be naïve enough to imagine that, prior to this decade, there was absolutely no sense of separation between the popularity of what would become known as folksong, on the one hand, and the technical methods of ‘baroque’ counterpoint as developed by Bach and so on, on the other? Bach’s music may well have been used by the community as a folk music in a sense, granted.

¹¹⁰ Altschuler, *All*, p. 26.

¹¹¹ Marcus, *Mystery Train*, p.140

Popular music, whatever it is, is not the same as art music, however: if it were, the category would no longer be needed. If the art/popular dichotomy reduces, in the last analysis, to a high/low (or elite/mass) distinction – and I would suggest that it necessarily does – the 1790s may well be a significant moment (as with 1899, 1955 and so on). The 1790s, however, could hardly be claimed as the absolute beginning of a sense of high/low difference in musical and artistic production; there was surely ‘bawdy’ and low-class song prior to this decade.

All this noted, we can also observe that popular music seems to develop and change a good deal from at least the middle of the nineteenth century onwards: a succession of new elements arise, normally getting hitched to some generic name such as ragtime, music hall or rock’n’roll. By examining the latter three cases, I hope to have shown not only that none of these was *entirely* new but, also (and crucially), that all three arose from historically specific conditions which seem to have made change seem necessary. The historical progression of capitalism, above all, seems to have not only kindled an element of demand for but also effectively enabled the creation of all three of the popular music styles discussed above, I would suggest: without the abolition of slavery, the rise of an industrial proletariat and the post-War socio-economic developments seen in the West overall, you would not get ragtime, music hall and rock’n’roll.

A further question arises from this, however: how valuable, for recently-‘emancipated’ African-Americans, slum-dwelling proletarians and rebellious teenagers lacking a cause, has the novelty of the correlative forms of popular music actually been? Did the newness of this popular music really count for much, politically? Did the novelty of the music drive the social changes of the relevant moment, or was it rather driven *by* the social changes in question? These, it seems to me, are crucial questions. I shall attempt, in later chapters, to suggest possible answers to them with a forwards- rather than backwards-looking agenda. Before so doing, however, I wish to consider two further key moments in the development of popular

music and the politics of novelty. Firstly, ‘the’ sixties, when politics and popular music are supposed to have coalesced with marked unilateralism, and the punk explosion of the 1970s. Secondly, in chapter three, the punk ‘year zero’ which is supposed to have been necessary to draw a line under the errors of the anterior ‘hippies’. The irony with seventies punk is that this year zero, according to a certain generation of would-be tastemakers, was pivotal and unique to the extent that, in the twenty first century, there really is ‘no future’ for popular music: nothing which young people could offer up now could match the eruption of 1976-7, supposedly.

Chapter Two: If You Don’t Care to Remember ‘The Sixties’, You Probably Weren’t There

‘No other decade of the twentieth century has acquired the mythological status of the 1960s’, begins M.J. Heale’s *The Sixties in America*. That depends, we might want to riposte, on what is meant by the word ‘mythological’.¹¹² Why not the ‘roaring twenties’, or the thirties’ build up to World War II? These surely at least compete with the sixties for world-changing historico-political and cultural shifts, don’t they? Heale’s use of the word ‘mythological’ is well made, however. It may well be the case (indeed I believe the word is chosen by Heale for precisely this reason) that the widespread belief that the sixties brought immensely significant changes, politically and culturally, has more substance in myth than in fact. What really changed? How new was the popular music of the period, and how important, in political terms, was its novelty? What political successes did the era bequeath to us? How much did music contribute to these successes? What can we learn from the era’s failures, as

¹¹² M. J. Heale, *The Sixties in America: History, Politics and Protest* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p.1.

regards the musico-political question, from a left perspective? These are our central questions in the present chapter.

Heale's opening pages are probably as good a place as any to begin engaging with these key questions. He mentions, in his opening paragraph, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, civil rights marches, Martin Luther King, opposition to the Vietnam war, the 'thrusting' peace movement, 'urban riots and violent confrontations on the streets', the birth of the New Left and their opposite number such as Barry Goldwater and George Wallace, 'determined political activism', 'a revived women's movement', 'popular currents... [which] threatened the command of established elites', rock music, marijuana and a walk on the moon.

This enumeration is a fair reflection of the general thrust of claims for the importance of the 1960s. How positively can we view them, from our present vantage point? JFK and MLK were both assassinated, of course; and we can add that, whilst they seem to have spearheaded important and laudable changes in different ways (especially so in King's case), their projects (in so far as we can say what Kennedy's intentions amounted to) were unfinished at the time of their untimely deaths. Lyndon Johnson's presidency, meanwhile, was 'ruined', it seems – and it led directly to Nixon's term in office, of course; one of several undesirable elements which the 1970s inherited from the decade under discussion. The Vietnam war was not stopped by the counterculture, although we can certainly applaud the effort; the thrust of the peace movement was also insufficient to ban the bomb. Riots and civil confrontations are hardly the sole reserve of the era at hand, although the street fighting men of the sixties have probably been more widely mythologised than those of any other era, granted. The New Left, as we will see, has been argued by many to have paved the way for the rise of the New Right – it did not, in other words, offer a sufficiently convincing addition to the existing (or 'Old', presumably) Left and, on reflection, may have played a key role in the demise of the organised left over recent decades.

The political activism of the 1960s may have been ‘determined’, but surely no more so than that of, say, Russia in 1917? (This partly depends, of course, on what sense of ‘determined’ is intended: from a Marxist point of view, the dissatisfaction which spurred ‘the sixties generation’ may have been more obviously determined by the contradictions within industrial capitalist economy than the conditions which spurred the ‘October Days’ in a country with a principally agrarian economy; but this is not the sense of ‘determined’ which Heale intends.)

The revival of the women’s movement was important, certainly, but we will see that much remained to be fought over and developed after the sixties. As to ‘established elites’, let us not forget that the means of production and the inherited ownership of huge bodies of land continued in much the same hands after 1969. Indeed, the aristocratic class remains substantially similar today, in terms of the wielding of power, compared to its power share during the 1950s and before; *The Independent* reported, on February 2nd 2005, that 69% of British land is owned by 0.6% of the population, for example. The moon landing, meanwhile, is contested to an extraordinary extent: ‘if you believe they put a man on the moon...’, sang REM in the 1990s, implying the view that such a faith would in fact be rather remarkable.¹¹³

Marijuana remains effectively illegal throughout the West.

The résumé is not entirely convincing when looked at critically, then. The astute reader will note that ‘rock music’ has not been commented upon amongst the items mentioned by Heale as contributors to the mythological status afforded to the sixties. As with ragtime, music hall and fifties rock’n’roll, it is recognisable that something new is audible within this music – a here-and-now novelty which made songs such as ‘Turkey in the Straw’ (a significant precursor to the development of ragtime in the nineteenth century according to Gammond, as

¹¹³ REM, ‘Man On The Moon’, *Automatic For The People* (Warner Bros), 1992.

we saw in the last chapter) seem ‘hopelessly hokey’ by the sixties.¹¹⁴ Fifty years later, many young listeners will find the music of the sixties hopelessly hokey in turn, presumably. Is a *political* significance fact or myth, though, as regards the novelty of sixties rock *in its moment*? This, at base, is our core question in the present chapter. Was the newness of sixties rock valuable to the Left (Old or New; to ‘the class’, more importantly, and ‘the minorities’ as they have been known since the sixties) or did that generation-defining musical novelty perhaps actually help to leave a door open to the rise of a New Right in dominant macro-political terms?

In order to approach these questions, I begin with a discussion of what ‘the sixties’ might mean in broad political and cultural terms: not only *when* this sixties may have happened but also *how many* sixties we may want to allow in order to best understand the epiphenomena under discussion. This is necessary because the sixties refers not to primary events but, rather, to a set of secondary interpretations which become the sixties when spun in a particular way: the 1963 March on Washington is (primarily) the 1963 March on Washington, for example, but it is also (secondarily) a key moment within this thing called the sixties (apparently). Questions as to what the sixties is/are will be our first concern, then. In the second section, I move to a closer discussion of the contribution to the sixties made by music and musicians, particularly rock music/musicians. In the third and final section, I explore tensions between two very commonly cited 1968 rock songs perceived widely to have contributed positively to ‘the counterculture’: was preference for the Beatles’ ‘Revolution’ over and above the Rolling Stones’ ‘Street Fighting Man’ *really* indicative of differences in ‘ideology’ rather than of ‘aesthetics’ during the period in question, as Dorian

¹¹⁴ Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.26.

Lynskey has claimed?¹¹⁵ If so, what should we name the two ideologies in question? What, come to that, should we name the ideology of the sixties overall – or might we do better to ascribe different ideologies to various different versions of the sixties? In order to approach these last questions, we must first get a feel for the range of things which fall within the bracket of the sixties, attempting to sort them into some form of viable grouping in order to clarify what is supposed to have happened – and perhaps also to begin to gain some sense as to what else could happen if we learn some lessons from the era in question.

A Tale of Two Sixties

It is possible, one imagines, to make the mistake of assuming that when people speak of the sixties they mean a specific duration of time running from January 1st 1960 to 31st December 1969. Such an assumption, despite the name, would be far from the truth. Most scholarly accounts of the sixties will afford some space for discussion as to when the sixties begins and ends. Again, Heale's *The Sixties in America* is a helpful yardstick. Drawing on a range of sources, Heale suggests that we can speak of a 'long' sixties, running from around 1958 to '72 or perhaps '74. Alternatively, though, he indicates that one could speak of a 'short' sixties, stretching from the 1963 March on Washington to Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968.

Record producer Joe Boyd takes the long view, then, when he suggests that the sixties 'began in 1956, ended in October of 1973 and peaked just before dawn on 1 July, 1967'.¹¹⁶ This makes sense from Boyd's (music-focussed) perspective, but we can also note that the period

¹¹⁵ Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs* (London: Faber, 2010), p.161; The Beatles, 'Revolution', *The Beatles* (EMI), 1968; The Rolling Stones, 'Street Fighting Man', *Rolling Gold* (Decca), 1975.

¹¹⁶ Joe Boyd, *White Bicycles: Making Music in the 1960s* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2006), p.1.

in question runs from that author's pubescence to his early thirties (a broad commonality of age grouping amongst the most vociferous enthusiasts of the sixties, I would suggest). In any case, I will suggest an alternative to thinking of a long sixties and a short one (both roughly centred around 1967 or, more often, '68): alternative narratives of the era(s?) which may make a good deal of sense from the point of view of political history and possibly also in terms of popular music history. A framework for this is effectively provided by W. J. Rorabaugh.

Exploring arguments for the short view, Rorabaugh acknowledges the 'turmoil and tumult' of 1964-9 but adds that 'It is possible to argue that the sixties did not begin until 1965, when African Americans rioted in Watts and when large numbers of American combat troops were sent to Vietnam', perhaps only ending in 1975 with the capture of Saigon by the North Vietnamese.¹¹⁷ Against this tumultuous later sixties Rorabaugh counterpoises the idea of an earlier 1960s characterised as a 'promising time'. Although he does not refer directly to a discrete 'earlier sixties' as such, I shall do so herein.¹¹⁸

Given the tendency, even in some scholarly work, towards mystification by nodding towards or directly invoking 'something in the air' in the sixties, Rorabaugh is gratifyingly clear as to

¹¹⁷ W.J Rorabaugh, *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.xvii.

¹¹⁸ It should be noted that Braunstein and Doyle have distinguished between 'two major phases' of the sixties counterculture. For them, however, the earlier phase runs from around 1964 to 1967 with the election of Nixon pivoting to the later stage, Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p.11. What I am calling the earlier sixties, by contrast, only begins in the 1950s and runs only up to around the time of Bob Dylan's Newport performance (1965).

the central root of the optimism in question: ‘Affluence made the sixties promising’.¹¹⁹ In short, his argument is that the presidency of John F. Kennedy combined with full employment and remarkable economic growth raised expectations of continuous improvements in the standard of living such that ‘an aura of unreality sometimes prevailed’ which ‘often bordered on euphoria’.¹²⁰ The assassination of JFK hastened the end of the perceived promising time, at which point ‘Setting sights lower prevented disappointment’.¹²¹ Rorabaugh’s implication of a tale of two sixties, one following the other, will be useful for the discussion I want to put forwards here. My suggestion is that the later sixties could be argued to have been something of a misadventure that – and the input of rock music towards the counterculture is particularly relevant here – led a whole generation to think, for example, that fighting for a different and better society can be ludic, facile and either the work of one self-enlightening individual (‘revolution in the head’) or a small alternative community separated from the larger society.

We should be clear, though, that Rorabaugh does not suggest an unproblematic protean importance in the early 1960s. ‘In the long run’, he suggests, ‘the political, social, and cultural changes that took place in the early sixties profoundly affected the way the United States evolved during the last third of the twentieth century’. These included ‘a racial crisis [which] was going to be difficult to solve... inevitably involving compromises’, a woman’s movement with an uncertain future and a world where nuclear war was perceived constantly as an imminent danger, amongst other issues.¹²² It is not the case that the early sixties was a

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.x.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.xi.

¹²¹ Ibid, p.232.

¹²² Ibid, p.xxii.

golden era which was betrayed by the militancy and increased pessimism of the later sixties followed by a long and overwhelming geo-political dominance of ‘neo-conservatism’/neo-liberalism, then. Rather, the early sixties sowed the seeds for pessimism and lowered aspirations amongst the left and effectively paved the way for the rise of the New Right in the last third of the century (and, we can add, the twenty first century also, so far).

What went well in the sixties, from a left perspective, and what did not? Were the failings of the era caused by the later sixties or were the raised expectations of the earlier sixties to blame for problems which subsequently arose? Let us return to Heale regarding these questions. As noted at the top of this chapter, he suggests a range of individuals, movements and events which contributed to the mythic reputation of the sixties. On the following page, and in the remainder of his introduction, Heale has to acknowledge the numerous discrepancies as regards the idea of the sixties as an unmitigated success. We learn, for example, of arguments that JFK’s presidency was a ‘failure’ in the eyes of many, with left critics suggesting his ilk were ‘more concerned to impede than to forward fundamental reform’.¹²³ One can certainly note, for example, that the idea of automatic entitlement to healthcare provision embodied in the UK by the NHS was not delivered under Kennedy and remains unaccomplished in the US. The New Left, meanwhile, *can* be viewed as ‘naïve, utopian... [and] indulging in fantasies that promoted violence and offered little of a constructive nature’.¹²⁴ Heale’s defence of the liberals – who ‘made mistakes but... did something for... the poor and for minorities’ – seems rather half-hearted (even if ‘something’ is better than nothing, which a hungry person will always affirm is the case of course). Likewise, the New Left who ‘nursed illusions, but also called authority to account and

¹²³ Heale, *The Sixties*, p.2.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

exerted liberating influence': what, after all, is this 'influence'?¹²⁵ The counterculture of the late sixties was famously under the influence of intoxicants, of course, which have been claimed as enabling a certain freeing of the mind: from a more sober point of view, however, Heale acknowledges that it is perfectly possible – indeed, one can easily claim it as the dominant view, I would suggest – to take the sixties as an indication that 'Revolution was unnecessary', given that the Vietnam war ended and Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were forced from office *without any coup d'état* being required ('evidence that the political system "worked"', in other words).¹²⁶

Perhaps, then, the sixties was less revolutionary than it is normally perceived to have been: perhaps, to quote John Lennon in 1971, 'nothing changed except that we all dressed up a bit, leaving the same bastards running everything.'¹²⁷ By 1980, in an interview which took place on what turned out to be on the last day of Lennon's life, he concedes a little more importance to the era in question, however: 'The thing the sixties did was show us the possibility and the responsibility that we all had. It wasn't the answer. It just gave us a glimpse of the possibility.'¹²⁸ This 'glimpse' is certainly worth talking about: the feeling – widely felt, it seems, by those who (unlike the present author) were alive during the 1960s – that a demand (requiring 'responsibility') for revolutionary social change had come into view during those years. The important question for the left today, surely, is whether what was felt to have been glimpsed can be brought more sharply into view.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.3.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman, *The Lennon Companion* (Cambridge, Ma: Da Capo, 2004), p.166.

¹²⁸ Jan Wiener, *Come Together: John Lennon In His Time* (Illinois: Illini Books, 1991), p.306.

On this question, I would suggest that a dichotomy – probably too strong a word, but let us push the argument for the purpose of discussion – between an earlier and a later sixties may be illuminative. If Mike Marqusee is right (and the argument is certainly echoed by many others) that the ‘hopefulness and sobriety of both Newport and the March on Washington had been replaced by bitter despair and ebullient self-indulgence’ in the later sixties, can we conclude (*contra* Heale, who seems to view the earlier sixties as setting up the later sixties to fail, as noted above) that there was a simple misfire around 1965 or perhaps ’68 which led a whole generation down a blind alley? This, I think, would be a too tidy argument. However, it seems clear that the civil rights movement – which gains so much momentum with the mid-1950s Montgomery Bus Boycott – involved more patient, traditional protest methods than the carnival-esque strategies adopted in the later sixties. In fact, much of the earlier sixties’ civil rights movement is methodologically analogous with the Old Left, we can reasonably assert. For example, there is a tendency in some quarters to promote Rosa Parks as a determined but politically-disengaged lady who ‘didn’t feel like getting up because her feet hurt, not because she was trying to start a civil-rights movement. It was a very honest and visceral reaction to things.’¹²⁹ The problem with this idea, as Stephen Duncombe (from whom this quotation is sourced) has pointed out, is that it has no real substance in fact. Rosa Parks was ‘a committed political activist’ who had been secretary to the Montgomery branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP): hers was ‘an instrumental act undertaken precisely to start a black bus boycott, and she acted knowing very well that the organizational muscle of black churches and civil rights groups was behind her’.¹³⁰ The

¹²⁹ Exene Cervenka of punk band X, quoted in Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), p.186.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

effectiveness of the ‘organizational muscle’ in question is legendary: the eventual official ending of the boycott, more than a year after it had begun and subsequent to a Supreme Court order to desegregate the buses, remains a staple of school history classrooms in the twenty first century. Was this part of the sixties? It was, at the very least, a pivotal protest for Martin Luther King who acquired national prominence due to his involvement; and it paved the way, to that extent, for the early sixties critical mass of civil rights activism. The broader point, for our purposes, is that it was enacted using a by-then well-established tool of the established left: the boycott, a political tool which we shall have reason to consider in later chapters with regards to the arguments of Badiou.

The earlier sixties civil rights movement, then, was connected to some extent with the traditional left, growing from similar roots and using similar methods: the boycott, the march, the impassioned public speech, and so on. As Rorabaugh shows, however, there were shifts in approach and attitude during the earlier sixties which brought tensions with the established civil rights movement and which can be taken as an element within the emergence of the New Left. A key manifestation of this shift, on Rorabaugh’s account, was the formation of the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960 and its resistance to assimilation within the older and well-established Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Both were principally ‘black’ organisations but the clergymen of the SCLC ‘belonged to an older generation that believed in authority and hierarchy and that engaged in activities inside large, disciplined structures’.¹³¹ The SNCC, by contrast, ‘had no desire to appendage to a group of oldsters’ and, in any case, ‘resisted top down authority’.¹³² Their anarchistic tendencies would seem to have dismayed many a representative of the Old Left,

¹³¹ Rorabaugh, *Kennedy*, p.74.

¹³² *Ibid*, p.74, p.78.

such as the NAACP's Roy Wilkins who publicly complained that 'They don't consult anybody. They operate in a kind of vacuum'.¹³³

It is never comfortable for a white scholar to make pronouncements with regard to Afro-diasporic people's choices or methods; I hesitate here, therefore, but feel nonetheless that the shift under discussion deserves some closer scrutiny. One thing about which there is no question, I think, is that the more traditional pre-sixties methods of struggle *did* achieve some important successes; we have briefly considered the NAACP-affiliated Montgomery Bus Boycott, for example. My understanding of the formation of the SNCC, meanwhile, is that Ella Baker (the committee's first administrator and a key activist within its initial development) had several legitimate dissatisfactions with King and other established figures of 1960 because 'she knew that these men, none of whom had small egos, would expect the students to take orders'.¹³⁴ I do not want to suggest that the SNCC in particular, nor the formation, more generally, of the New Left were entirely unnecessary.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, elements of the above data make one wonder about the extent to which the novel attitudes and methods of the SNCC and the New Left were valuable.

Consider, for example, the objection to 'hierarchies' and 'large, disciplined structures' mentioned above. Is being large and well-disciplined really a problem for the left? Is full avoidance of hierarchy actually efficacious or even entirely thinkable? Elements of this tension lead us towards consideration of the classical anarchist/Marxist faultlines – a debate I

¹³³ Ibid, p.75.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.74.

¹³⁵ Claybourne Carson has claimed some 'important differences' between the SNCC and the New Left, we should note here, Claybourne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.175.

do not intend to enter into here. We can note, however, that on Rorabaugh's view the SNCC's later sixties 'downfall came not from the Old Left but from advocates of Black Power' who exploited the SNCC's 'lack of any mechanism to control membership'.¹³⁶ One need not be a Marxist dogmatist to query the efficacy of absolute determination to avoid hierarchy on all levels – yet, equally, we should acknowledge that the rise of Black Power in the later sixties was *not*, in the eyes of many, a 'downfall' but, rather, a necessary corrective to the inter-racial ideal of the earlier sixties.

Clearly there are difficulties here for the scope of the present study, given our interest moreover in the relationship between politics and popular music and, more specifically, the utility of ostentatious musical novelty in order to provoke social or political change.

Hopefully we can at least conclude provisionally, based upon the above discussion, that a significant element of the shift from the earlier to the later sixties rests upon a move from a high level of optimism, positivity and confidence in peaceful methods during the earlier period to a more pessimistic, atomised and aggressive mood from, at the latest, 1968: 'more cynical than idealistic, militant rather than nonviolent, angry and pessimistic where their predecessors had been hopeful and utopian'.¹³⁷ The rise of Black Power appears to be perceived by some (Rorabaugh, for example) as a less desirable element of the later development.

According to Alice Echols, the idea of a problematic atomisation in the later sixties arises from an assumption by 'white male new leftists' that their own experiences are 'universal... [and] defining [of] the era, whereas the experiences of women and people of color... are

¹³⁶ Rorabaugh, *Kennedy*, p.79.

¹³⁷ Dickstein, Morris, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.xii.

constructed as particularistic'.¹³⁸ Consequent to this, a view has proliferated in 'most sixties books' that 'radicalism was simply played out by the decades end' thus leaving only 'token space' for narratives around women's liberation, race issues and lesbian/gay rights: the sixties slogan that 'the personal is political', for example, is often thrown down as evidence of the unhelpful post-sixties splintering of what was supposedly once 'the' movement.¹³⁹ Against such thinking, Echols points out that specific activists within the emergent Women's Liberation movement of the later sixties had found WL 'an ecstasy of discussion' where previously one specific activist (who 'speaks for many', Echols suggests) 'had felt sort of "blank and peripheral"' within 'the larger, male-dominated protest Movement'.¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, Echols even goes as far as to distinguish explicitly between the (capital M) Movement, on the one hand, and the (lower case m) movement, on the other (a distinction we shall return to below).

In my view, Echols position is well argued and provides an excellent tonic to the suggestion I tentatively raised above that the shift from Old to New Left may have been disempowering, in the long run, for the left overall. I will return in the next section of the present chapter to questions around the singularity of 'the Movement' as regards a particular claim of an absolute linkage between music and protest in the sixties. At present, I want to at least say that I am not attempting, in this chapter nor in the book overall, to make a vulgar Marxist insistence that the late twentieth century shift away from orthodox (class-focussed) leftist methods and assumptions was necessarily a bad thing. What I do want to emphasise is that the sixties left many issues unresolved; and that the changes wrought by the sixties were not a

¹³⁸Echols, *Shaky*, p.64.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.77.

singular thing, hence my repeated references to an earlier and a later sixties. In fact, there are far more than two sixties, of course: indeed, plurality is one of the key novelties which the era brought to the political field.

That said, Heale is aware that there are a wide range of limitations arising from the sixties: ‘Optimism and activism’ were ‘weakened’ by the era, and ‘many of the hopes of the Sixties... had not been fulfilled’.¹⁴¹ Echols too wants to challenge ‘the idea that the sixties represented a total rupture, a golden moment where the ideas and values of the dominant culture were banished’.¹⁴² Morris Dickstein is more disparaging still: ‘what mattered most about the sixties... For some... was the stoned culture of sex, drugs and rock’n’roll’.¹⁴³ The counterculture (which is what Dickstein is gesturing at, I think; a rather different beast from the New Left, although also an extension of the latter in some regards) suffered from ‘its inability to affect policy, to elect candidates, or even to preserve its own integrity in the face of failure and backlash.’¹⁴⁴ On Dickstein’s view, ‘our society will never be the same’ and yet, at one and the same time, ‘it never really changed’ (to some extent, of course, this is simply a paraphrase of Lennon’s famous comment quoted above): looking at the sixties in retrospect, ‘it’s distressingly hard to know just what the excitement was about’.¹⁴⁵ If this is the case for someone who appears to have witnessed many classic sixties events (Ginsberg reading his poetry and such like), it is surely even harder for those of us born in the 1970s and after. I would not think it an exaggeration to say that most of us latecomers hold the music of the sixties in high regard; sales of *Mojo* magazine alone would seem to attest to the enduring

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.155.

¹⁴² Echols, *Shaky*, p.12.

¹⁴³ Dickstein, *Gates*, p.ix.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.62.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.82.

appeal of this music. If, though, Dickstein is right that ‘rock *was* the culture of the sixties in a unique and special way’, we are entitled to wonder whether the various failings listed above were worth the trade-off: if, that is, it were possible to erase Richard Nixon (for example) from the history of the last fifty years but, in order to do this, we also had to lose, say, the entire back catalogue of the Rolling Stones – should we really hesitate? Personally, I’m inclined to think otherwise, although I do enjoy many of their songs.

The last suggestion is facetious, granted. We do need to think critically, though, about the role of popular music in the rise and fall of the sixties. ‘Counterculture, so much to answer for’, we might sing to the tune of an old Smiths song. The question of rock/popular music and the sixties is our next area of focus, therefore. I will give Dickstein the last words for the present section: ‘If we face up to the betrayal of certain bright hopes, we may soon learn to be hopeful about new realities’.¹⁴⁶ This, it seems to me, is the best use to which we can put ‘the sixties’.

The MC5 *is* The Revolution

When people under a certain age think of the sixties, what image comes firstly into their minds? For people *over* a certain age – people born in the 40s, especially – images such as Huynh Cong "Nick" Ut’s photograph of the ‘Napalm girl’ in Vietnam or long-haired protestors clashing with the police would be likely, I think. A younger constituency, however, might picture the toothy grin of Austin Powers saying ‘groovy baby’. For those born well after the era under discussion, in other words, and particular for those who lack any special interest in twentieth century history and/or rock music, the radical edge of the counterculture has made little impression, I would suggest. Hippies, as far as the twenty first century

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p.216.

teenagers I used to teach are concerned, are a bit of a joke: the ‘hippy sign’ (the CND symbol, that is, although one would have to search long and hard to find a teenager today who realised that this symbol literally spells out a C, an N and a D) looks OK on a t-shirt, but it doesn’t really mean more or less to most young people than, say, Nike’s ‘Just Do It’ tick, I contend.

This is a shame, really, since the later sixties’ counterculture formed an exceptionally large body of young people who certainly *did* seem to demand change. Why did so little real change happen? How was the Vietnam War able to proceed into the mid-1970s despite such strong protest against it? How did the nuclear bomb manage to retain its perceived status (particularly ludicrous in a post-Soviet world, one might have thought) as a ‘deterrent’? Why are there still so few Afro-diasporic students in the typical university? Why is marijuana still illegal when it is so widely used and, in the eyes of many, so harmless (relatively speaking, they might conditionalise)? What went wrong?

It would be beyond the means of my project here to attempt a lengthy answer to this last question. I want to propose, however, that a key element may be the very ‘rock culture’ which is so widely taken to be part and parcel of the counterculture. Consider, for example, Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle’s remark that the counterculture encompasses ‘any action from smoking pot at a rock concert to offing a cop’.¹⁴⁷ One could perhaps write an entire book in response to this statement, but I shall restrict myself to a few brief observations. Firstly, the ‘from’ and ‘to’, here, doesn’t really imply a sweep anywhere near the range of radical activity which other literature indicates as featuring within the counterculture bracket (where, for example, would Women’s Liberation slot into this spectrum?). Secondly, the menu itself, by suggesting the murder (‘offing’) of policemen, makes a firm step away from the predominant non-violence of the earlier sixties – a

¹⁴⁷ Braunstein and Doyle, *Imagine*, p.5.

reasonable indication of the position in which the counterculture belongs in terms of the tale of two sixties sketched above, certainly, but one which begs the question as to how many of the hundreds of thousands (millions, arguably) belonging to this counterculture *really* perceived the murder of policeman as being ‘where it’s at’. Thirdly, and most importantly for our purposes, does taking drugs at a rock concert *really* deserve the status of (implied to be political) ‘action’ – and even if it does, does it really belong within a bracket which stretches out to anonymous (‘a’ pig implies ‘any’ pig, I would argue) killing of the foot soldiers of the state?

Were rock concerts really that radical in the sixties? And did you really *have* to get high to ‘be here, now’? The old line runs that ‘if you remember the sixties, you weren’t there’, of course. Personally, I definitely wasn’t there because I wasn’t born – but I’ve seen plenty of people smoking ‘mary jane’ at rock concerts in the 1980s, ’90s and beyond. If, today, someone takes enough drugs to obliterate their memory, could they ‘be here, now’ in the same way as the sixties counterculturalists were? Nobody believes as much – least of all the ‘survivors’ of the sixties (who tend to be chauvinists of the singularity of the era in which they were young). Why? Something in the air, it seems: in Ian MacDonald’s view, ‘the sense then of being on the verge of a breakthrough into a different kind of society was vividly and widely felt’, with ‘the glimpse of something better, however, elusive permanently changing the outlook of millions’.¹⁴⁸ You had to be there, then: flowers in the hair, a paisley shirt and a spliff today just won’t match the mystical feeling, one assumes.

MacDonald walks an interesting line, overall: he realises that the counterculture featured plentiful ‘adolescent nonsense’ and that some hippy leaders were ‘self-dramatising opportunists’, yet he wants us to believe that ‘huge sections of society’ received ‘a fair share

¹⁴⁸ Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles’ Records and the Sixties* (London: Pimlico, 1994), p.4.

of justice' from the sixties.¹⁴⁹ What's fair, though? (What's justice, come to that?) One assumes he is referring to, for example, the winning of race rights through, for example, desegregation in the South – but these successes were won in the earlier sixties, before the rise of the counterculture. Perhaps MacDonald means Women's Liberation and the Gay Rights movement, then? Our objection here must be that women were fighting for 'a fair share of justice' long before the sixties and are fighting for it still; many gains have been made by women, lesbians/gays and 'blacks', certainly, but none of these struggles really begins in the sixties nor do their greatest successes occur in that era.

Above all, in his thoroughly enjoyable *Revolution in the Head*, MacDonald wants to tell us that the popular music of the sixties in general, and especially that of the Pied Pipers which his text analyses in rich detail (the Beatles, that is), made the era what it was in large part. It's great music, of course; really novel stuff, in so many cases (the Beatles being especially rich in musical innovation, as any honest musicologist must confirm). What about the politics, though? How do the sixties' music and its politics fit together? In the eyes of some, like a hand in glove: 'The music and the movement grew together... so much so that it is difficult to think of one without the other.'¹⁵⁰ Is this really so, though? Are the gains in civil rights won in the earlier sixties *really* unthinkable without reference to the music which is often associated with it? The cautiousness with which Mike Marqusee approaches this question seems, to me, a far more convincing assessment: 'My sixties experience – not least listening to Dylan – set me off, perhaps too often, looking for the aesthetic in the political and the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.118.

political in the aesthetic.¹⁵¹ For Marqusee, in other words, the sixties mixture of cultural elements ('the aesthetic') with politics may have gone too far – and the music of Bob Dylan may be a particular case in point.

Dylan always seems to rear his head in any discussion of the sixties, so it is probably inevitable that some space is afforded to him in the present context. I want to say firstly, and in line with many a discussion of the period, that his role in the break between what I am calling the earlier and later sixties is obviously pivotal: the 1965 Newport performance in which he brought rock to the folk stage is, without question, the symbolic dividing line within 'the history of the sixties as a journey from idealism to hedonism'.¹⁵² How valuable, though, was Dylan's role in the period of 'idealism' (the earlier sixties, that is)? In the eyes of some Afro-American activists of the day, the folk singer's famous appearance at the culmination of the March on Washington in 1963 was far from ideal: 'What was a white boy like Bob Dylan there for?', Dick Gregory asked, adding that the likes of Dylan and Joan Baez should 'Stand behind us'.¹⁵³ Marqusee, from whom I have sourced this quotation, adds that 'The role of the white and (relatively) famous in a mass movement for black rights' would 'haunt' the sixties: 'In this movement to end exploitation, who was exploiting whom?', he asks poignantly.¹⁵⁴

It's a good question, and no amount of references to the greatness of this or that lyric by Dylan can quite erode the fact that involvement in civil rights set the former Robert Zimmerman off on a road to commercial success and personal wealth. Everyone knows that Dylan broke with the left-active folk movement, dealing the latter a crippling blow. Any

¹⁵¹ Marqusee, *Chimes*, p.2.

¹⁵² Boyd, *White*, p.107.

¹⁵³ Marqusee, *Chimes*, p.13.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.14.

assumption that the famous booing which occurred at his performances at and after the Newport performance was purely an *aesthetic* objection to novel music would be questionable, furthermore: is it not plausible that, at this pivotal moment, Dylan's former fans saw the writing on the wall for the protest songs which many count as part of 'the' sixties but which actually, in the terms I am using here, were far more a part of the earlier sixties than the later one?

My implication that Dylan utilised opportunism is perhaps a little unfair. For Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, after all, 'Dylan in the early 1960s when he was a movement artist... helped constitute the Movement for activists and for outsiders'. Shouldn't we just accept this as fact and move on? Eyerman and Jamison's lack of rigour with the capitalisation or otherwise of the word 'movement', here and elsewhere in their work, might make us hesitate before doing so, however. There is no scholarly problem with using capitalisation to distinguish between similar but different types, of course: indeed, Echols' alternate use of the capital 'M' or, alternatively, the lower case 'm' for 'movement', as discussed above, allows her to make a clear and useful point about the unity (or lack thereof) of a singular sixties counterculture. It is clear, however, that Eyerman and Jamison have made no such careful distinction in the sentence quoted above: for them, rather, the sixties 'Movement' is very much one thing, and Dylan 'helped' make it; the possibility that it helped to make Dylan never seems to appear on their horizon.

It is not difficult to show that the writer of amazing lyrics such as 'The Times They Are a-Changin'' was in fact a highly muddled thinker as regards certain key political issues.¹⁵⁵

Consider, for one example, his infamous 1963 speech when accepting the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee's Tom Paine award (handed to Bertrand Russell one year earlier):

¹⁵⁵ Bob Dylan, 'The Times They Are a-Changin'', *The Times They Are a-Changin'* (CBS), 1964

drunk, Dylan remarks that, on the March on Washington platform, ‘I looked around at all the negroes there and I didn’t see any negroes that looked like none of my friends’. This, it seems, was because ‘My friends don’t wear suits’ and ‘don’t have to wear any kind of thing to prove they’re respectable negroes’.¹⁵⁶ To some extent, this echoes the reported feelings of Ella Baker during the formation of the SNCC in 1960, of course; and Dylan may have well represented the viewpoint of a younger generation including many African Americans, therefore. The fact, however, that Dylan would speak this way about highly dignified, brave and determined protestors who had fought for civil rights, in some cases since before the folksinger was born, is truly shocking. One thinks of the Monkees theme tune which would appear not so long after this speech: ‘we’re the young generation, and we got something to say’; fair enough, of course, but if the left were to accept that *only* the young’s voices should be heard – well, for one thing, we could learn nothing from hearing about the sixties now, in the twentieth century (surely a disaster for the publishing industry, at least, for whom memoirs by survivors continue to be regularly produced and to sell in remarkable quantities).

We also might mention Dylan’s remark to *Rolling Stone* magazine that ‘I hate to see chicks perform... because they whore themselves’.¹⁵⁷ Then there is his notorious comments at Live Aid in 1985: ‘the money that’s raised for the people in Africa, maybe they could just take... one or two million... to pay the mortgages [that] some of the farmers here owe the banks’.¹⁵⁸ Clearly, then, Dylan makes a better rock star than he would a politician. This, in itself, would not be a matter for our interest if it weren’t for the exaggerated claims made on Dylan’s behalf by commentators and some scholars. Charles Hamm sums up the general problem:

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in *ibid*, p.88.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in Echols, *Shaky*, p.218.

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in Marqusee, *Chimes*, p.281.

‘The times were changing in 1963, when the [Bob Dylan] song was written. But the times have always been changing. And so has music.’¹⁵⁹ That given, we should certainly challenge Eyerman and Jamison’s idea that ‘Music could, for a brief period of time [in the sixties], provide a basis of common understanding and common experience for a generation in revolt’: if this could happen in the sixties, it should be possible for it to happen again, and labelling all music which has happened since – Kurt Cobain’s Nirvana, even – as a ‘repackaging [of] the sixties experience in new musical form’ is, frankly, risible.¹⁶⁰

For similar reasons, we should challenge the chauvinism for the sixties shown by the likes of music journalist Ian MacDonald when he complains of ‘the drab and sometimes surly “travellers” of today’.¹⁶¹ Similar to this is music producer Joe Boyd’s complaint that ‘Protestors today seem like peasants outside the castle gates compared to the fiercely determined and unified crowds I joined in the sixties’.¹⁶² One wonders, on the one hand, whether Boyd has actually *been* on any of the major demonstrations of the post-sixties era (London’s Poll Tax riots in the early 1990s, say, or Seattle in ’99, or the anti-Gulf War protests of the early noughties – all of which would seem to vie for scale and/or importance with, say, Chicago in ’68). Simultaneously, on the other hand, one wonders whether Boyd is conscious that he is indirectly invoking John Lennon’s retrospective judgement upon the sixties generation in ‘Working Class Hero’ (‘you think you’re so clever and classless and

¹⁵⁹ Charles Hamm, ‘Changing Patterns in Society and Music: The U.S. Since World War II’ in Charles Hamm, Bruno Nettl and Ronald Byrnside, *Contemporary Music and Music Cultures* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p.35.

¹⁶⁰ Eyerman and Jamison, *Music*, p.138, p.141.

¹⁶¹ MacDonald, *Revolution*, p.16.

¹⁶² Boyd, *White*, p.268.

free', Lennon asserts, 'but you're still fucking *peasants* as far as I can see').¹⁶³ Similar to Boyd and MacDonald is Jerry Rodnitsky's conclusion that a specific 2004 attempt towards 'a return to political and protest music', according to Rodnitsky, 'may well turn out to be just another brief flashback to the 1960s'.¹⁶⁴ Marqusee's contrary position seems far more beneficial to the left, I would suggest: 'Self-indulgent celebration of our generation... does [twenty first century anti-war protestors] no favors'.¹⁶⁵ I am sure he is right, indeed, that 'the sixties might someday come to seem merely an early skirmish in a conflict whose real dimensions we have yet to grasp'; for many today, I believe, that time has already arrived.¹⁶⁶

Which sixties, though, teaches us which lessons as we attempt to move the conflict in question forwards? The earlier sixties, I suggest, seems to show that Old Left methods can yield significant victories and, in conjunction with popular music stars such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, not to mention a hierarchy-challenging New Left emergence, can build a powerful popular base. (The case of the earlier sixties also reminds us that social reform is easier to accomplish when the economy is booming; and that popular music is more likely to sound optimistic when income levels and levels of employment are giving cause for optimism.) What of the later sixties, then? Here, I would suggest, the break with the Old Left is more firmly enacted. For example, Doug Rossinow's statement that 'Since the 1960s, it has seemed obvious to many that American leftists should display a strong sympathy for cultural dissent and that they should even participate in alternative or bohemian lifestyles' is far more

¹⁶³ John Lennon, 'Working Class Hero', *Plastic Ono Band* (Apple), 1970.

¹⁶⁴ Jerry Rodnitsky, 'The Decline and Rebirth of Folk-Protest Music' in Ian Peddie, *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp.17-29: 29.

¹⁶⁵ Marqusee, *Chimes*, p.4.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.278.

true of the later sixties than what I am calling the earlier sixties.¹⁶⁷ In the earlier period, by contrast, many civil rights activists were far from bohemian (hence Dylan's complaint) and their dissent was more political than cultural (more focussed, that is, on specific political reforms, such as segregation in schooling, than on the cultural display of dissent, such as the graffiti popular in Paris during May 1968).

Before we can think about which model (earlier or later sixties) we might prefer for the left today, we must ask *why* the shift occurred. Here, Rossinow can help us again: on his view, the activists of the earlier sixties 'saw no need to wear their radicalism on their sleeves' whereas, by the end of the 1960s, 'it would become an article of faith among young American rebels of all kinds that one could indeed judge a book by its cover'.¹⁶⁸ From where did these young rebels get this impression? Without question, in my view, the rise of rock within the counterculture (or the creation of the counterculture by rock music, as some seem to view it) was the causative of this transformation. In Rossinow's view, we can note, 'nothing would change more drastically in the American culture of radicalism during the next ten years than this'.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Doug Rossinow, 'The Revolution is About Our Lives: The New Left's Counterculture' in Braunstein and Doyle, *Imagine*, p.102. Eric Drott has suggested that 'one of the most significant consequences of May '68 was the belief that it had in fact produced such significant consequences', 'Music and May 1968 in France', in Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton, *Music and Protest in 1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.271.

¹⁶⁸ Rossinow in Bronstein and Doyle, *Imagine*, p.105.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Consider John Sinclair (manager of the MC5)'s famous call for 'Total assault on the culture by any means necessary, including rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets'.¹⁷⁰ What might someone who agreed with this statement look like? Probably not like a 'family man', since most of us would prefer our offspring not to witness sexual intercourse in a public place; indeed, Sinclair made a point of handing flyers advertising his events 'only to those who "looked hip"' – not square-looking Dads such as myself, then, I suspect.¹⁷¹ More telling still, I feel, is the limit of the assault: the *culture* (as opposed to, say, the Government). Also of interest, for our purposes, is the linkage of 'rock and roll' with this 'total assault'. Sinclair was confident enough about this link that he could state that 'The MC5 *is* the Revolution'.¹⁷² Indeed, he seems to have viewed rock as a viable vehicle for building the counterculture to the extent that he hoped 'genuine mass revolution' would then become possible: 'the White Panthers [effectively led by Sinclair, with the MC5 operating as something of a mouthpiece for the 'Party'] believed they could reach the millions of disaffected youth who may not have otherwise responded to a radical *political* message'.¹⁷³

How politically effective, though, can a mass of protestors be if it thinks that mere cultural change is enough to be going on with and which, in the main, was attracted to dissent primarily due to an enthusiasm for music? Perhaps we should heed Sinclair's own retrospection: given the political utility which Nixon's administration found in presenting the White Panthers as a threat to national security, 'The Government... should have been *paying*

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Jeff A. Hale, , 'The White Panthers' "Total Assault on the Culture"' in Bronstein and Doyle, *Imagine*, pp.125-158: 128.

¹⁷¹ Hale in Bronstein and Doyle, *Imagine*, p.129.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, p.144.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, p.151, emphasis retained.

us for what we were doing'.¹⁷⁴ At work here, presumably, is Sinclair's somewhat mischievous combination of intelligence and cynicism (what could recall the Cynics, such as Hipparchia, more strongly than the proposition of 'fucking in the streets'?¹⁷⁵). That said, perhaps the tale *is* cautionary; perhaps, indeed, the whole movement (within which Sinclair was certainly a prime-mover) towards an idea that revolutionaries should be 'freaks' – the movement, that is, towards the counterculture itself and its faith (discussed above) that leftists should be bohemians – was a mistake. Will a transformation of society mean that the culture of that society will be radically transformed also? Perhaps so (but see chapter six for some more detailed considerations of the possible nature of a post-revolutionary society). To assume that one can display a cultural transformation in *advance* of the social change, however, is somewhat to put the carriage before the engine, I would suggest. How did Sinclair know that those who did *not* 'look hip' were not (and, more importantly, could not become) sympathetic to the left? Such seems to be simply taken as read (or regarded as not being an issue – the revolution, in short, is not for the average person). Did Dylan believe that a suit-wearing 'negro' with a proven commitment to the left was much the same as the famous 'Mr. Jones' of his song 'Ballad of a Thin Man' – out of touch, that is, too old and utterly incapable of understanding something that was happening in the sixties?¹⁷⁶

There is fair reason to suggest that such is the case, as we have seen. It is not such a leap, furthermore, to propose that the musical input (rock, of course, but also avant-garde art music

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, emphasis retained.

¹⁷⁵ R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p.42.

¹⁷⁶ Bob Dylan, 'Ballad of a Thin Man', *Blonde On Blonde* (CBS), 1966.

of the sixties¹⁷⁷) was crucial in the generation of the countercultural sense that the revolution was only for the young and hip. As Greil Marcus rightly says, ‘Rock’n’roll is not a means by which to “learn about politics”, nor a wavelength for a message as to what is to be done or who is to be fought.’¹⁷⁸ Should one be forgiven, then, for thinking that rock’n’roll is politically useless? Perhaps not, for Marcus adds that, in times such as the summer of 1968, this music can provide ‘a way to get a feeling for the political spaces we might happen to occupy at any particular time’.¹⁷⁹

Obviously this is rather vague: something ‘might happen’, sometime – but that something is nothing more than a feeling. That said, at least Marcus is honest as compared with some of the more grandiose proselytisers of the political power of sixties rock. The importance of a somewhat ineffable ‘feeling’ is, in fact, a repetitive motif in writings on the sixties: both Susan Sontag and Herbert Marcuse have written explicitly about a ‘new sensibility’ during the era, for example. On their view, this new feeling places popular music over and above the ‘classical’ art music of the West. For Sontag, the high/low distinction has been rendered ‘less and less meaningful’ (the Beatles being the last point of reference in her essay on the new sensibility) by conditions which we have since learned to describe as postmodern. Meanwhile Marcuse firmly counterpoises blues, jazz, rock’n’roll and soul against Beethoven and Schubert, idealising a jazz pianist between the barricades in May ’68.¹⁸⁰ Charles Reich, in his influential *The Greening of America*, is even more chauvinistic for the novelty of sixties pop

¹⁷⁷ For ample detail of sixties avant-garde art music’s contribution to the international counterculture, see numerous chapters in Kutschke and Norton, *Music and Protest in 1968*.

¹⁷⁸ Quoted in *ibid*, p.63.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁸⁰ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p.302, p.304; Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), pp.42-3, p.30.

and rock as compared with the high art of former times: ‘Not even the turbulent fury of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony can compete for sheer energy with the Rolling Stones’.¹⁸¹ On Reich’s view ‘the new music... has a complexity unknown to classical music’, although he gives us no clue as to where in the music we can look for this supposed higher complexity. The closest Reich gets to musical detail is the mystifying assertion that ‘Beethoven seems like a series of parallel lines, sometimes vertical, sometimes diagonal’. By alleged contrast and even more vaguely in terms of normal musical discourse, ‘The [sic] Cream, or Crosby, Stills and Nash can set up a texture of rhythms, timbres, kinds of sounds, emotions’ which leave ‘the classical composers... in a world of simple verities, straightforward emotions and established, reassuring conventions’.

Reich’s attempts at musical analysis are obviously weak, with ‘texture’ and ‘rhythm’ combined in a confusing manner (the vertical confused with the horizontal, so to speak). How do ‘timbres’ differ from ‘kinds of sounds’, furthermore? His idea that classical composers are ‘reassuring’ is highly problematic (perhaps so, for him in 1970, but not in their day, I think – we know, for example, that Beethoven was perceived as a highly challenging composer at the time he produced his early masterworks, for example). Nevertheless, his proposal of music as ‘the chief medium of expression, the chief means by which inner feelings are communicated’ amongst sixties youth – a view point which we have seen asserted many times in the present chapter, indeed – begs a closer look at the music in question for our purposes.

Destruction and Fighting in the Streets – Count Me In or Out?

¹⁸¹ Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), p.207 and for all subsequent quotations in this paragraph.

As noted above, the Rolling Stones' 'Street Fighting Man' and the Beatles' 'Revolution' have been argued to reflect different 'ideologies'. The two songs are a very frequent touchstone for discussion of the link between sixties rock and the counterculture of the period. What is going on in this music? How different or similar are the approaches? How important, politically, were the interventions in question? These are our key questions here.

Turning firstly to the Stones' song, what is notable to my ear is the ambiguity of this music. Allow me an auto-ethnographic reflection, for a moment. At some point around the late 1970s, as I approached my tenth birthday, my older brother Martin bought the classic Stones retrospective double album *Rolled Gold*. A firm Beatles fan at the time, I was nevertheless greatly impressed by the set, noting the significant differences in musical character between the nine songs on side one (from the earlier sixties) and the five tracks (from the later sixties) on side four. Of the later five ('Honky Tonk Woman', 'Sympathy for the Devil', 'Street Fighting Man', 'Midnight Rambler' and 'Gimme Shelter'), our song of focus here was my least favourite: I enjoyed 'Street Fighting Man' to a point but could never quite discern the lyrics and found the feel of the other four songs far more exciting; often, indeed, I would lift the tone arm to skip this particular track.

Listening to the song today, that said, and studying it in some detail, I am struck by its unusual structure in terms of certain bar lengths and also the unusual numbers of bars in the different sections. It is also somewhat ambiguous in rhythmic terms as well as, to some extent, in terms of its harmony. By the Stones' standards, that said, the song is unsurprising harmonically: the opening riff is based around a tonic to subdominant shift, C to F9 with one bar per chord. The subdominant chord is voiced in an interesting manner, as is typical of Keith Richards, but this is hardly earth shattering in a sixties rock context: Hendrix's voicings and even Pete Townshend's are typically richer and/or more inventive, it is fair to say. The shift to the dominant chord (G major) in the chorus is rather predictable, as is the movement

to D major (the dominant of the dominant relative to the C tonic, implying modulation to G major). The bass line beneath the D chord moves from the root to the octave D and then down, via the steps of the pentatonic minor, back to the root in a classic sixties style which most listeners will easily be able to recognise as being typical of the era.

Moving on to the rhythmic character of ‘Street Fighting Man’, we find much more interest. The opening guitar chords, discussed above, set up a feeling of the first strum as the stressed beat: in other words, we can hear the opening two strums of C major as two quavers (‘coffee-rest-and-coffee-coffee’, as one might explain it to a novice player: two quaver-length C chords, one quaver rest and then five light quaver-length strums to make up the opening four beats). The second bar (the interestingly-voiced F9 inversion chord) follows a similar rhythm but, crucially, at the third bar we hear a tom drum hitting what, based on the ‘feel’ created so far, seems to be the down beat of the second and fourth crotchets. The effect is confusing until a triple hit on the toms reconfigures the feel of strong and weak beats such that, at the close of the fourth bar, we suddenly shift to a sense that the first strum of C was actually an anacrusis with the second strum in fact being beat one. The guitar quickly refocuses and, from here on, we more-or-less feel the strong up-beat at the opening of each bar as that implied by the drums and *not* the opening guitar figure.

There is ambiguity here, then – an ambiguity which, although the ensemble broadly agrees to the rhythmic terms set up by the drummer (Charlie Watts, a wonderful player who is entirely vital to the Stones’ sound, it is worth mentioning), remains in play in the remainder of the song. For example, Jagger’s vocal line in the verses naggingly emphasises what, from the drum rhythm’s point of view, would be the up beat. The effect of this vocal line is not unusual for the sixties: we can hear the same basic idea at the heart of the Beatles’ ‘If I Needed Someone’ and the Byrds’ rendition of ‘Mr. Tambourine Man’, for example.

However, it adds to a certain flavour of confusion in this piece of music, underscored by the

syncopated anticipations of the first beat of the bar by the whole ensemble as Jagger delivers the lyrics ('but *where* I live the *game* to play is *compromise solution*', for example, with each italicised syllable being markedly underscored by a syncopated bass drum kick from Watts).

The most interesting musical ambiguity in the song is certainly the structure of bars. If we take the opening of the song as eight bars consisting of four tonic-subdominant switches, as seems reasonable, it is notable that the first verse's vocal actually takes all four beats of the eighth bar to deliver the words 'Everywhere I...' as a form of anacrusis prior to the shift of what feels like the main verse. With the arrival of the word '...hear' we move to the subdominant chord (F major), pedalling on it for ten beats (two normal four beat bars and one short two beat bar, as I hear it). This is followed by six beats of the tonic chord, C major (one bar of four beats and one, which could be said to be 'paying back' the missing beats from the bar of two just mentioned, consisting of only two beats). We then get fourteen beats on the F (raising the question as to whether the eighth bar of the intro really 'belongs' to the verse; for the purpose of this discussion, I will assume that it does belong to the intro, however, thus making the intro a full eight bars), which can be referred to as three four beat bars plus one two beat bar. This is followed, as with the verse's first phrase, by six beats of C (one and a half bars of the tonic, we can say).

On this reading of the verse, its length (if we treat each two of the two beat bars as adding up to one full four beat bar) is nine four beat bars, constructed around highly unusual and irregular phrase lengths. This pattern is repeated in the second verse but the third is more intriguing still: possibly due to the reduced quantity of syllables in the lyric, the first line drops one four beat bar from the phrase length. I will return to this expansion and contraction and general unruliness of the song's phrase lengths in a discussion below, when I will also consider the lyrics of the song. Firstly however, given that we have seen repeated claims above for the significance of 'the music itself' as regards sixties rock, I will now make a brief

analysis of the Beatles' 'Revolution' for the purpose of comparison. It is worth adding, to extend the auto-ethnographic aspect of my discussion, that I was highly attracted to this song (which I would listen to on the flipside of 'Hey Jude') as a boy primarily on account of the level of 'fuzz' distortion on the guitar, the like of which I had never heard before: I don't recall the lyrics making much impression on me, although I think I recall some curiosity as to who 'Chairman Mao' was.

It doesn't take a musicologist to recognise the debt to Chuck Berry in the opening guitar riff: the lick will be immediately associated with Berry by almost any listener enculturated in rock'n'roll music. At face, furthermore, the song appears to be a fairly straight 'rocker', with a markedly fifties-styled rock'n'roll ending using a chromatic descent to the flat seventh of the tonic B major. The bass line is also characteristic of rock'n'roll: McCartney offers a classic arpeggiated 'boogie' for the majority of the song. The song is less obviously ambiguous, in musical terms, than 'Street Fighting Man' and is rather conservative by comparison with the bulk of the Beatles recorded output of the preceding two years or so (it was recorded during July 1968). There are, nevertheless, elements of musical interest worth talking about.

Salient, in this regard and also in common with 'Street Fightin Man', is the irregular phrasing during the verse. 'You say you want a revolution', Lennon sings over a straight four beat pattern. The straightness, however, is disrupted by a peak F# on the third syllable of the word 'revolution'. The F#, being the dominant note relative to the B major key, is no surprise in itself yet, due to its placement on the main beat of the second bar, the peak note disrupts the flow of the phrase. With characteristic cleverness the songwriters (officially, at least, this is a 'Lennon-McCartney' song) rectify the disjuncture by simply adding two beats to the phrase such that the song feels like a bar of four then a bar of six crotchets. There is an eight bar phrase here, then, but with one bar stretched out to a '6/4' length.

What does it mean when a singer expands and contracts phrase lengths at will, like this?

Susan McClary hints somewhere that, in the hands of Robert Johnson, this unruly shortening and lengthening in terms of quantities of bars is indicative of a certain level of (implied to be somewhat macho) wilfulness.¹⁸² We can note with interest, therefore, that not only peacock rockers the Rolling Stones assert their will with a technique like this in ‘Street Fighting Man’ but also the ostensibly pacifist Lennon in ‘Revolution’. That given, if performative masculinity has an ideological function then it may be that these two songs have more in common than some commentators have believed.

Harmonically, ‘Revolution’ includes some intriguing quirkiness in the bridge/pre-chorus section (‘But when you talk about destruction...’, to quote the first line of the first bridge – a much discussed lyrical ostentation which we will have need to examine further below). The ii-V switch (C# minor to F# major) at the outset of the bridge is unremarkable. However, the quick movement, after the return to C# minor, through a ii-III-VI sequence (C# minor-D# major-G# major) is highly unusual. Why modulate to G# at this juncture? As is often the case with the Beatles, the melody is leading the chord progression here (whereas the opposite is true in a huge amount of post-war popular song): the ‘...count me out’ follows the notes C#-D#-B#, thus obviously leading the harmony of the first two of our three chord cadence.

What of the B#, though? In order to make sense of this somewhat dissonant note (the sharpened form of the tonic note, always a surprise to the ear), the chordal support seems to me to have been arranged to make ‘sense’ of the jarring vocal note. The band plays G# major,

¹⁸² Johnson’s ‘phrase irregularity’, McClary insists, ‘is not a sign of primitivism’; rather, she suggests, phrasing is ‘a parameter he bends as wilfully as pitches, rhythms, and timbres: even the meter expands and contracts to accommodate his rhetorical impulse’, Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.52.

that is, because the major third degree of this scale is B# thus bedding down the dissonant note in a reasonably tonal context (the VI chord being a fairly comfortable mediant position in preparation for the closing dominant flourish which leads into the chorus). This ii-III-VI cadence is appended to the preceding four beats such that, as with the verse, we are given an extended 6/4 bar. If we count the last-mentioned bar as a bar and a half, the bridge section is five and a half bars long; but even if we just call the 6/4 bar a single bar, this would leave us with a five bar bridge section, which is markedly unusual.

The chorus of 'Revolution' is nothing special musically speaking, although its extended form at the close of the piece is notable for Lennon's throat-ripping performance – arguably his 'dirtiest' vocal since 'Twist and Shout' (1963) and a foreshadow of the primal screaming-inspired vocals which would be heard on *Plastic Ono Band* (1970).¹⁸³ Adding to this impassioned vocal the remarkable dirtiness of the guitar timbre, there is ample reason to read 'Revolution' as a serious piece of music intended to make a serious point. We can also note with interest that the 'out' of the line '...don't you know that you can count me *out*' (which answers the line 'when you talk about destruction...'), famously rendered ambiguously as 'out... in' on an alternative take of the song which would subsequently appear on *The Beatles* album AKA *The White Album*) falls precisely upon the dissonant B# discussed above. This 'count me out', furthermore, adds two beats to the bridge (as mentioned), lending a special weight to the three words in question. With regard to this we can note that the slower and more ambivalent 'out... in' version on *The White Album* was recorded prior to the version we

¹⁸³ The Beatles, 'Twist and Shout', *Please Please Me* (EMI), 1963

have discussed above, in May/June 1968.¹⁸⁴ There is every reason, therefore, to think that Lennon (and possibly the whole group) were highly uncertain as to whether ‘destruction’ (and ‘minds that hate’ as well as the ‘carrying [of] pictures of Chairman Mao’, indeed) should be encouraged or not: a musical picture of ambiguity on this (these) pivotal decision(s) is knitted into the song itself, and Lennon made it clear more than once that the dilemma was uppermost in his mind.¹⁸⁵

What of ‘Street Fighting Man’, at the lyrical level? The song certainly seems to have been received as being less equivocal than the Beatles’ track by most commentators. Allan F. Moore, who can generally be relied upon to pay closer attention to the detail of a song than almost any other writer, for example, suggests that the Rolling Stones’ song is ‘less obviously equivocal’ than the Beatles’ track.¹⁸⁶ That said, Moore has also paid close enough attention to the lyric to realise that it finds ‘the Stones distancing themselves from the action’, prioritising ‘talk (the song)’ over ‘action ([which] they did not undertake)’.¹⁸⁷ In fact, we can go quite a bit further in a reading of this lyric as regards its promotion of action or otherwise. ‘But what can a poor boy do’, the singer asks, ‘’cept to sing for a rock’n’roll band?’ Quite a bit, we might want to respond: for example, instead of singing for a band, he could show solidarity with other poor boys – and girls, and men and women who may even have reached puberty

¹⁸⁴ MacDonald, *Revolution*, p.223, p.237. The earlier version, known as ‘Revolution 1’, is in A major rather than B (oddly, MacDonald erroneously claims that the song is in C; a surprising error for a writer whose ears are normally fairly well-attuned).

¹⁸⁵ Pearce Marchbank, *Beatles in Their Own Words* (New York: Book Sales, 1978), pp.97-8.

¹⁸⁶ Allan F. Moore, ‘British Rock: The Short ‘1968’ and the Long’ in Kutschke and Norton, *Music*, pp.154:170: 155.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

prior to World War II, indeed – and work towards something more than a ‘compromise solution’.

Do we *really* believe that Jagger would ‘kill the king’ in a ‘palace revolution’? Or is this song as theatrical (and thus, in a firm sense, disconnected from real-life activism, as Moore hints) as, say, ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ (the true highlight of side four of the *Rolled Gold* set, in aesthetic terms, as far as this author is concerned)? Readers must judge for themselves, of course. What I am prepared to assert, however, is that the question as to whether violence (of a kind – let us leave the word as read, for now) is necessary, ‘in the last analysis’ (as Marxists will say), remains a crucial one for real-life activists today just as much as it was in the sixties (and before, of course – during the two world wars, for example). What conditions would be necessary for a leftist to offer the words ‘count me in’ when a revolutionary situation appears to demand ‘blood and iron’? I will not attempt any specific prescription, here; but I will say that it is an important decision which, in the form of questions about ‘reasonable force’ and such like, activists will often have to make (not to mention discussions, necessary prior to many types of political actions, as to the collective mood with regards to the risk of and likelihood of arrest).

‘Street Fighting Man’ is good theatre, with an enjoyably ambiguous (and novel, by twentieth century standards) musical character as well as a fairly clear lyrical message – namely, as I read it, that the time is ripe for revolution and yet you can’t do much, politically, other than sing in a rock’n’roll band. ‘Revolution’ is a more equivocal song, lyrically speaking. The song is not sure – to an extent which, in one of the two versions, offers an exemplary aporia – whether now is the time for violence. It appears that Lennon may even have had the larger/longer class war in his mind when he wrote this song: speaking as ‘someone from the working class’, he remarks that ‘I thought the original Communist revolutionaries

coordinated themselves a bit better and didn't go around shouting about it'.¹⁸⁸ This interest is not accounted for in the lyrics, but such a context renders Lennon's scepticism regarding the enraged counterculture of 1968 as somewhat less of an attack than a critique: are you sure, Lennon could be interpreted as asking, whether you really mean what you say when you say you want a revolution? Musically, meanwhile, I would suggest that the fifties rock'n'roll-recalling elements of 'Revolution' (the nod to Chuck Berry, the boogie bassline, the blues-influenced harmonic structure, the closing cadence, the character of the keyboard break, and so forth), not to mention the inherent optimism of the lyrics ('Don't you know it's gonna be... alright?!'), places it as belonging more strongly to the earlier sixties. 'Street Fighting Man', by contrast, strongly belongs to the later sixties in which pacifism in particular was often deemed to be no longer worth talking about and the Old Left in general was also deemed to be passé. For example, the lyrics suggest not only that we should 'kill the king' but also that we might 'rail at all his servants' – who, from the countercultural point of view, were too 'unhip' to realise that a revolution in the head had made, say, a concern with class consciousness decidedly old hat, presumably.

On several levels (rhythmic, structural, textural, in terms of phrasing and timbre, lyrical, harmonic, and the particular ensemble of musical elements and combination of generic effects) both of these are highly novel songs in a popular music context. In both cases, that said, it has been clear from my analysis that the two songs can be directly related to other musical pieces from the same era (the chord voicings in the Stones' track, for example, were noted as bearing some comparison with the playing of Pete Townshend and Jimi Hendrix) and earlier eras (the clear fifties-recalling elements within 'Revolution'). Whichever direction one prefers to tip the scales, as regards this balance of novelty against, shall we say, a

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Marchbank, *Beatles*, p.98.

‘nestedness’ within post-war popular music, something new was certainly happening here. How important, though, was the element of novelty here; how important was it, moreover, to the ‘spirit of ‘68’ which one reads about in books such as Kutschke and Norton’s excellent *Music and Protest in 1968*?

The impression one gets is that rock music, in the later sixties, seriously bolsters numbers within the New Left and other remnants of the earlier sixties. I would suggest, in keeping with several texts already quoted, that this enlargement is largely made possible by innovations in popular music which led the public discourse to begin talking of ‘rock’ in a particular way not quite connoted by the words ‘rock and roll’. Some writers appear hostile to the folk-influenced protest music of the earlier sixties: Sarah Hill, for example, argues that the likes of Richie Havens and ‘Country’ Joe McDonald, both of whom performed at Woodstock in 1969, were ‘angrier and more direct’ than earlier popular music, singling out Joan Baez and Phil Ochs in a manner which is completely unpersuasive and probably reflects a preference for music over political change.¹⁸⁹ Hill suggests the possibility, for example, that ‘the point of a protest song was to get the audience to “dig it”’.¹⁹⁰ The point, however, is to change it, I would suggest; otherwise what one has is not, in fact, a protest song at all but, rather, a feel-good exercise.

¹⁸⁹ Sarah Hill, ‘“This is My Country”’: American popular music and political engagement in “1968”’ in Kutschke and Norton, *Music*, pp.46-63: 49. Havens and McDonald’s music may or may not be more enjoyable as music, but I see no grounds for Hill’s assumption that the song’s demonstrate greater anger or are more direct than those of Baez and Ochs.

¹⁹⁰ Hill in Kutschke and Norton, *Music*, p.50. In fairness to Hill, one should acknowledge that, with the words ‘dig it’, she is gesturing at something particular which she does give some further detail of in her thought-provoking piece.

That said, by offering audiences the chance to ‘dig it’ (in Hill’s sense), the innovative rock bands of the later sixties seem to have played a crucial role in the enlargement of the counterculture (note, for example, the special place afforded to music in the hopelessly idealistic but also marvellously optimistic work of Reich discussed above – for Reich, music is the principal generator for the new sensibility of the sixties which he calls ‘Consciousness III’). Is it important whether the ‘message’ is clearly understood by the newly amassed audience? That depends, presumably, on how serious the message is. Based on my reading of ‘Street Fighting Man’, I would suggest that Todd Gitlin may have received a fair impression of the ‘vibe’ of the song, for example. Gitlin gives us some information as to his ‘clandestine one night stands’ in ’68, assuming – rightly, perhaps – that his readership are interested in this information.¹⁹¹ He goes on, in an effort (one imagines) to demonstrate some sensitivity to issues raised by the Women’s Liberation movement, to suggest that ‘Streetfighting men outnumbered streetfighting women, but in the dark he could impress any number of her more retiring sisters’.¹⁹² Admittedly the song doesn’t mention gender relations specifically (although it does, of course, specify the gender of the street fighter). What the song does do, in line with John Sinclair’s famous line already quoted above, is to engender a sense that the revolution has done enough (or reached its limit, perhaps) when everywhere there is rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets. The retiring sisters of the streetfighting women should at least be useful for the third of these three elements of this ‘revolution’.

Are these elements really the limit of revolution, though? Were they ever really important?

Rock and roll is a form of popular music (or an amalgam of several forms, we might prefer to

¹⁹¹ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), p.372.

¹⁹² Ibid. Surprisingly, I think, Echols is generous enough to Gitlin to claim ‘great perceptiveness’ within his work but, that said, she also ‘pulls him up on his shit’ as I imagine some might put it, *Shaky*, p.65.

say): some feeling of ‘one-ness’ at, say, a Stones concert in 1969, does not count for much on its own, from a political point of view. When Mark Kurlansky suggests that ‘one of the great lessons of 1968 was that when people try to change the world, other people who have a vested interest in keeping the world the way it is will stop at nothing to silence them’, he effectively implies that ’68 didn’t have much to teach us at all – unless we are completely ignorant of the history of revolutions, after all, we should already have learned this ‘great’ lesson.¹⁹³ The vital question for the left, therefore, is always at what point to push all the way and take up arms, with willingness to kill and be killed in the name of the cause. If the decision that ‘now is the time’ is made too hastily, the vanguard leadership can find blood on its hands. Kurlansky mentions, immediately after the above quote, the infamous murder of four demonstrators at Kent State University in 1970. Did these four die in vain or was this a necessary (if regrettable) loss within a serious class war?

I would say that the four students did not die in vain, for even though the war proceeded on well into the 1970s, their deaths bolstered the anti-war effort not only in that era but also (even if indirectly) the struggles against war today. In any case, the students were unarmed and their murder by armed guards was therefore not commensurate with, for example, the state response to the Baader-Meinhof gang. Nevertheless, as argued above, the decision as to when to *really* push for revolution should not be made lightly if the avoidable loss of human life is to be avoided. On this count, the aporia of Lennon’s ‘Revolution’ may not necessarily need to be dismissed in quite such a peremptive fashion as compared with the perceived-to-be-‘gung ho’ spirit of the Stones’ ‘Street Fighting Man’.

Chapter Conclusion

¹⁹³ Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked The World* (London: Vintage, 2005), p.380.

The 'sixties generation' (we could say the 'baby boomer generation' except that, in fact, this would be to disregard the immensely influential contribution to the era in question by individuals who reached puberty before the end of the second world war, such as Allen Ginsberg and Bertrand Russell, to name just two) should be applauded for its political successes. A huge number of local, progressive and/or radical projects were instigated and successfully run and, although this chapter has not made space to describe them, this author is happy to applaud any effort by any individual to improve race, class or gender relations, sexual rights, individual freedoms (such as the right to experiment with drugs) and so on. What is hopefully clear by now, though, is that I am resistant to the idea that the sixties has some special right to insist upon its own uniqueness and salience with regards to the power of protest.

Take marijuana: a young person experimenting for the first time with this drug today will doubtless gain a new sensibility, in a clear and important way, from their smoking experience; she/he will be taking a step away from a dominant consciousness in society that hitherto he/she has considered 'normal', one can say. Why, then, are we supposed to consider the 'turning on and tuning in' which was so common in the later sixties to be a *unique* moment? Surely the key question is as to whether this drug is dangerous and should be banned or, alternatively, whether it is relatively safe and can offer valuable experiences (as so many 'hippies' and others have asserted) and should therefore be legalised. This question, I would argue, is essentially ahistoric: marijuana either should or shouldn't be illegal, surely; if this drug 'opened the mind' for the Beatles in 1964 then why shouldn't it do the same for young people in their early twenties today?

Many issues raised in the sixties can be argued to have been somewhat toe-punted by the generation under discussion. The legalisation of marijuana is one such example, I think, but perhaps a trivial one (although not so trivial for John Sinclair and others who spent

considerable periods of time in prison for the possession of this particular herb). More important, I would suggest, is the peace movement. By pushing for militancy against war, the later sixties counterculture seems to have significantly muddied the water as regards the best policy for challenging 'US Imperialism' and so on. It is common, within discussions of the later sixties, to note the irony that members of the (self-perceived to be) 'ultra-radical' Weatherman group should have unwittingly blown themselves up making bombs in Manhattan in 1970.¹⁹⁴ What is less frequently observed, however, is the intrinsic irony of fighting fire with fire: the non-violent ideology of, to take the most obvious example, Martin Luther King in the earlier sixties is a far more obvious fit with an anti-war impulse than the bald militancy of many counterculturalists in the later sixties.

To what extent did songs such as 'Street Fighting Man' contribute to the shift in question?

The impression gained from every book referenced within this chapter is that popular music was entirely vital for the enlargement of the New Left and the other movements of the earlier sixties such that, by the later sixties, an immense counterculture was identifiable. The narrative one finds in these texts is typically that, having opted overall for a militant attitude (or been pushed into it by the counter-counterculture moves made by the State, perhaps), the counterculture movement splintered and collapsed by the mid-1970s at the latest.

The sixties' contribution to the twentieth century history of the left was not without problems, then. To what extent, then, can we really claim that the radical tinge found in some popular music from the sixties was valuable? My reading of 'Revolution' and 'Street Fighting Man' suggests that, to some extent at least, we can take the songs as pointing towards different ways of responding to the explosive growth of the counterculture in 1968. As noted above, Dorian Lynskey has even suggested that a difference in 'ideology' is in play between these

¹⁹⁴ Cathy Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun* (New York: Seven Stories, 2007), p.1.

two songs. He may be right, although perhaps the ideological difference is not quite what Lynskey thinks it is, I would argue.

Overall, it may not be such a good idea to attempt to gauge ideology (let alone learn about it as a young person) through listening to the thoughts of rock stars. Popular music can help to raise money for or consciousness about particular causes, of course; and exceptionally insightful songwriters such as Bob Dylan or Phil Ochs can give genuinely useful observations about, say, the state of capitalism at some given moment. It is likely, furthermore, that novelty in popular music (and in this regard I will not deny that the sixties had an embarrassment of riches) can be very helpful if you want to raise more money, attract more protestors, or intensify a larger number of individuals' sense that capitalism is unjust and must be overcome. Having said this, it may also be that the element of novelty has been greatly overstated in its importance towards popular music making a significant contribution to political change. It may even be that, by prioritising 'the new', would-be-radical popular music unwittingly offers a golden ticket to capitalists (the opportunity to sell the new thing). In the last analysis, one of the greatest lessons we can learn from sixties popular music may be as follows. If the extent of radicalism stalls at the excitement of smoking a joint at a rock concert for the first time then, to paraphrase a famous major label advertisement from the sixties, the man *can* bust our music (or our music scene, at least). We must look beyond (or, perhaps better, look askance at) certain sixties-related combinations of music, novelty and politics, therefore, if we are to encourage popular music to make a more decisive and/or effective contribution to the left in the future.

Chapter Three: 1977, Year Zero (ish)

Morris Dickstein has argued that 'There are no real beginnings and endings in history, certainly not in the histories of sensibility and consciousness, only irruptions that alter the

flow and shift the continuities'.¹⁹⁵ Bill Drummond is on much the same page, I would suggest, when he insists that 'every generation of artists needs... to smash the yoke of pop, art, literary history and have their very own Year Zero, their own small-press revolution, their punk revolt and their Marcel Duchamp'.¹⁹⁶ Both, however, seem to have forgotten Marx's old line that history always repeats itself, firstly as tragedy and subsequently as farce.

What is the point of would-be-revolutionary popular music if all it offers is a new sense of the flow of 'continuities' of capitalism, meeting the 'needs' for only a *feeling* of revolt? Surely what we really need – unless we are just messing about, just posing – is real change in society. The idea of repeatedly delivering each year a 'revolutionary' Year Zero, therefore, is rather a bad joke: it suggests a fear of actual revolution amongst exponents of popular music (commensurate, it is fair to say, with the Last Poets' complaint in the sixties that 'Niggers Are Scared of Revolution').¹⁹⁷

Why did a generation born (in just about every case) in the 1950s rise up in the 1970s against 'the hippies' who had been born in the 1940s? Just because they wanted to do it all again, in their own modified way, perhaps: as Ian MacDonald has put it, 'The young make their own fun whatever time and place they're in, the natural dynamism of youth serving to heighten its surroundings'.¹⁹⁸ For MacDonald, however, the punks just didn't get it when it comes to the sixties: 'In rejecting the hippies, the punks of 1976-7 discarded only a caricature, coming

¹⁹⁵ Dickstein, *Gates*, pp.183-4.

¹⁹⁶ Bill Drummond, *45* (London: Abacus, 2000), p.188.

¹⁹⁷ The Last Poets, 'Niggers Are Scared of Revolution', *The Last Poets* (Douglas), 1970.

¹⁹⁸ MacDonald, *Revolution*, p.1.

nowhere near an adequate grasp of what they imagined they were rebelling against'.¹⁹⁹ This begs the question as to what the punks thought (mistakenly or not) the hippies stood for.

It is fair to imagine that a typical late seventies punk might have gained an impression of what the sixties were about from a book such as Charles Reich's best-selling *The Greening of America*. If so, our young punk (or soon-to-be-punk, if the book was read around the time of its first publication in 1970) could have seen an idealisation of 'Afro hair and shoulder-length golden-blond hair... sharing the values and experience that the scene represents'.²⁰⁰ The music, meanwhile, is 'soaring, ecstatic, earthly rock that shakes the crowd, the buildings, and the heavens themselves with joy; and above the scene presiding over it, those benevolent deities, the sun-god, the ocean-breeze, the brown-green Berkeley hills'.²⁰¹ Such idealistic and pseudo-spiritual visions seem to have made many (or at least some) within the younger generation want to vomit. A key question, if we are to decide whether to accept or challenge MacDonald's dismissal of the punks, would be whether Reich's dream is credible: the dream of a golden dawn in which whites and blacks ('Afro' and 'blond') were in perfect unity. Let's dig a little deeper, then. For Reich, people can 'experience the same thing in the same way' at 'a rock concert' and yet simultaneously these 'individuals preserve every bit of their individuality'.²⁰² Is this actually possible?

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p.16.

²⁰⁰ Reich, *The Greening*, p.211.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

We can at least say that the idea is thoroughly un-Marxist, even though Reich claims that his thinking is ‘consistent’ with the ideas of Marx.²⁰³ The suggestion of a facile arrival of sameness and equality (rock fans experiencing ‘the same thing in the same way’ at a concert), furthermore, is extremely hard to take: particularly so if one of these fans lives in an inner-city council flat (as many punks indeed did) whilst the person on the stage lives in a mansion. Contra MacDonald, then, I would suggest that it is likely that the seventies punks had a fairly sound understanding of what ‘hippies’ and the counterculture had been trying to achieve and, just as importantly for the task ahead, what the hippies had failed to achieve. Most of them grew up with the counterculture very much on view, after all; especially those growing up in London, such as the Sex Pistols and the Clash. I would argue, indeed, that the chauvinism for the sixties shown by the likes of MacDonald looks less and less convincing as we gain a more distanced perspective on that era. The present chapter seeks to avoid risking a comparable chauvinism for the seventies punk era.

It will be critical in the present discussion, therefore, to look critically at not only successes or successful/positive elements which arose from seventies punk but also failings and weaknesses of the period. As with the sixties, we must ask what went well and what did not. A key question will be: was seventies punk progressive or reactionary in political terms? We can note, for example, Nik Cohn’s complaint that Bob Dylan, in the sixties, had ‘grown pop up... given it brains’; by doing this, Dylan (and, by implication, the idea of pop-with-brains) hadn’t ‘so much changed rock as... killed off one kind and substituted another. And if the kind he killed [is] also the kind I love, well, that was hardly his fault’.²⁰⁴ One can assume, on

²⁰³ Ibid, p.20. For Marx, consciousness is determined by social conditions and only in a communist society could full individuality of the kind which Reich idealises be possible.

²⁰⁴ Nik Cohn, *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: The Golden Age of Rock* (St. Albans: Paladin, 1970), p.174.

the basis of this, that Cohn should have appreciated the arrival of punk in the mid-to-late seventies: a good deal of this music took its cue directly from the immature rock which Cohn clearly preferred, for example (one need only recall the Eddie Cochrane covers by the Sex Pistols²⁰⁵), whilst a general reaction against progressive ‘rock with brains’ was characteristic of the ‘first wave’ seventies punk scene, it is fair to say.

Perhaps seventies punk was just a reaction against the later sixties, and thus it was (negatively) defined by the thing which it opposed. I am far from convinced that such is the case, however: I will suggest in this chapter that first wave punk was not just a statement of (symbolic) rebellion which each generation is entitled to enact before it conforms to the expectations of capitalist hegemony; it also added some novel elements to the mixed field of politically-orientated popular music. Expectations of ‘punk rock’ ran incredibly high around 1977, as we will see. That said, I certainly adhere to the view that the early UK punk scene (upon which I focus in this chapter, as opposed to the longer tradition of punk about which I have written elsewhere) did not go far enough down a radical path, as with the sixties before it. My interest again, then, is in what went well politically and what could have taken us further towards a different kind of society.

The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I discuss the sense of empowerment which first wave punk seemed to kindle within many individuals. Second, I critique the failures of political will which seem to have followed the initial excitement around ‘punk rock’. Third, I move to analyses of two particular songs from the punk-related field, in order to ascertain something of the extent to which punk has relied upon a politics of novelty.

The Boy Looked at Johnny

²⁰⁵ The Sex Pistols, ‘C’mon Everybody’, ‘Something Else’, *The Great Rock’n’Roll Swindle* (Virgin), 1979.

There are innumerable books scrutinising the seventies punk rock ‘explosion’. Amongst writers on the topic, Clinton Heylin has perhaps taken the most panoramic view by surveying ‘proto-punk’ (an increasingly popular epithet of late) from the Velvet Underground onwards as well as the continuation of punk into the eighties and nineties. As Heylin has shown, many have spoken of ‘something in the air’ as the seventies progressed towards the 1976-7 explosion of interest in what became known as punk rock. It is evident that *Creem* magazine was prescient not only by publishing Dave Marsh’s 1971 coinage of the punk rock couplet but also with Lester Bangs’ article ‘A Program for Mass Liberation in the Form of a Stooges Review’ in the following issue.²⁰⁶ As Heylin shows, Bangs was very much a punk *avant la lettre*: he was at his happiest when sticking two fingers up at the progressive forms of rock which were dominant at the time and he reified stripped-down, straightforward rock which didn’t necessarily require painstaking rehearsal on an instrument. Bangs subsequently wrote that *Creem* ‘rejected the counterculture as a lot of horseshit’.²⁰⁷ In Heylin’s view these *Creem* writers ‘were attempting to restore... a prelapsarian rock & roll when the rules of commerce did not apply’, by ‘blowing away in a deliberately snotty-adolescent way the solemn jive of the counterculture; pushing for the new, the experimental, the obscure’.²⁰⁸

This, I would suggest, is an adequate synopsis of the mood which kindled the punk rock movement: a dislike of the counterculture and an urge to take rock back to a simpler (although also somewhat novel/experimental/‘obscure’) sound. Can we go somewhat further, though, by suggesting that this was a *political* objection to the counterculture, on the one hand, and a purely *aesthetic* restoration of older rock’n’roll musical effects coupled with

²⁰⁶ Clinton Heylin, *Babylon’s Burning: From Punk to Grunge* (London: Viking, 2007), p.3.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

novelty, experimentalism and obscurantism, on the other hand? Such would be a rather too clean cut, I think. For one thing, it is clear from numerous comments by agents within the formation of seventies punk rock that the dislike of countercultural ‘hippies’ had a significant aesthetic/sartorial dimension: flares versus drainpipes, for example, or the differences in hair length. Meanwhile, I am inclined to think that tensions between novelty and aesthetic conservatism *do* have some significance in ‘political’ terms – but not necessarily the significance which might at first appear obvious. It is largely this ‘pushing for the new’, for example, which demarcates a separation between the ostensibly apolitical ‘pub rock’ scene (which immediately preceded and fed into the arrival of punk rock, offering a more complete attempt at restoration of ‘prelapsarian rock & roll’), on the one hand, and the relatively higher levels of political interest in punk rock, on the other hand.²⁰⁹ Can we be sure, though, that this doesn’t just mean that pub rock was simply more honest about what it was/is – entertainment?

Punk offered an emphatic change of style relative to the sixties; we can at least be confident of this. Can we interpret punk’s opposition to the pre-punk counterculture associated with ‘hippies’ as an aesthetic corrective to the various failings of the sixties as discussed in the previous chapter, though? Perhaps so, perhaps not: after all, sartorial concerns may well have equalled if not exceeded any conscious desire to avoid any political or tactical errors of the past. Overall, perhaps, it was just a matter of a new generation staking its identity through rejection of a perceived era (‘the sixties’). ‘I realized that they had grown up reading about

²⁰⁹ See Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), pp.27-9 for a discussion of ‘social and political comment’ in punk rock. For Laing, pub rock was ‘the old thing again’, p.7, whereas first wave punk was more ‘different to [sic] earlier types of rock music’, p.11.

hippies in the tabloid press', sixties survivor and early enthusiast of seventies punk Caroline Coon has remarked; 'So I said, "The gutter press did to hippies what they're going to do to you"'.²¹⁰ Somehow, though, the idea of seventies punk as *only* a generational shift, doomed to repeat the same mistakes, is unsatisfactory: surely there is something more particular, and particularly political, which separates sixties rock from seventies punk?

One clue, here, might be Slits guitarist (and a core insider of the nascent seventies punk rock generation, it seems) Viv Albertine's retrospective remark that 'We grew up during the "peace and love" of the 1960s, only to discover that there are wars everywhere and love and romance is a con'.²¹¹ Here and elsewhere we get a feeling that the younger generation, by the mid-seventies, was highly disillusioned by a perceived mismatch between the 'hippy dream' and the urban reality. A similar mood can be discerned, for example, within comments from Mary Harron, a Canadian who seems to have taken an interest in the emerging punk scene whilst living in Oxford: 'Hippy culture had gone very mainstream... You got so sick of people being nice, mouthing an enforced attitude of goodness and health.' By contrast, 'Punk was liberating and new: the idea of smoking sixty cigarettes a day and staying up all night.'²¹²

Why would 'goodness and health' and people being 'nice' make a person feel sick? Perhaps because the lived experience of the complainant is a poor fit with such things. Some of the first wave punks were from firm middle class backgrounds (Joe Strummer, for example), but most were either on the dole and/or living in squats (including Strummer) or were from less

²¹⁰ Quoted in Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p.231.

²¹¹ Viv Albertine, *Clothes Clothes Clothes Music Music Music Boys Boys Boys* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p.133.

²¹² Quoted in Savage, *England's*, p. 133.

than affluent backgrounds and/or working dead-end jobs (Mark Perry of the influential *Sniffin' Glue* fanzine, for example).²¹³ There is of course room for argument about the class character of seventies punk. We can note, for example, Jon Savage's suggestion that Slaughter and the Dogs (one of the first punk-orientated bands to emerge in Manchester) were 'what the Punks of rhetoric were *supposed* to be: four working-class hooligans from a vast thirties estate'.²¹⁴ The word I have emphasised suggests Savage feels that such roots are not in fact always to be found in punk. Doubtless some punk bands were and are more firmly proletarian than others, then: indeed, Dave Laing has suggested that 'most punk performers had working class backgrounds' but adds that 'that majority is not overwhelming enough to justify the claim that punk is fundamentally proletarian'.²¹⁵ There may, indeed, have been performative elements to the 'working class' nature of some singers: Simon Frith, for example, has argued that the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten (John Lydon) 'developed an explicitly working-class voice by using proletarian accents, drawing on football supporter chants'.²¹⁶ Frith may be right, yet it is evident that Rotten was from a poor London-Irish background and, therefore, he probably 'developed' this accent fairly easily (and perhaps with a lower degree of consciousness than Frith's words would imply).

For clarity, we should note that many of the sixties rock groups featured individuals from working class origins; Peter Green of the original Fleetwood Mac, to pick an example almost at random. Some even wore their 'blue collar' credentials on their sleeve, indeed, such as Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Standells. Lyrics dealing with issues like working

²¹³ For detail on the importance of the squatting movement to the emergence of punk, see Heylin, *Babylon's*, pp.68-9.

²¹⁴ Savage, *England's*, p.199, emphasis added.

²¹⁵ Laing, *One Chord*, p.122.

²¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid*, p.57.

throughout the summer merely in order to earn a dollar were certainly not unknown in rock music before punk. However, the seventies punk trajectory is unmistakably towards songs about mundane experience and inner-city or suburban life, delivered with markedly working class accents and by people who appeared more obviously working class than, to repeat the sample, Peter Green (even when, as in the case of Joe Strummer, they were actually far less proletarian than Green). I am suggesting, then, that seventies punk, overall, brought a *qualitative* shift away from the perceived hippy generation: it was not only a matter of a younger generation marking its territory in some arbitrary fashion.

The most important element of this qualitative shift is probably the feeling – very widely felt by audience members at early punk gigs, it seems – that ‘I could do that’. Consider Adam Ant’s reflection on seeing the Sex Pistols’ debut gig, in 1975 at St. Martin’s College, for example: ‘I’ll never forget that. I left [my] band that night; I thought fuck it, this is it, y’know? They were fantastic.’²¹⁷ Interestingly, though, the appeal was not only that ‘they were playing simple songs, that I could play’; additionally, he suggests, ‘they were always above me and you had to aspire to imitate them’.²¹⁸ Joe Strummer of the Clash came to a similar conclusion some months later: ‘The difference [between his pre-Clash group the 101’ers and the Sex Pistols] was, we played “Route 66” to the drunks at the bar, going, please like us’. However, ‘here was this quartet who were standing there going, we don’t give a toss what you think, you pricks, this is what we like to play, and this is the way we’re going to play it. Regardless of whether you like it or not.’²¹⁹ As with Adam Ant, Strummer immediately broke his group up, later forming a new one (the Clash) which better fitted the

²¹⁷ Jon Savage, *The England’s Dreaming Tapes* (London: Faber, 2009), p.273.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.274.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.256.

emerging paradigm of punk rock. Mick Jones (Clash guitarist) echoes Strummer's feeling of epiphany: 'As soon as I saw the Sex Pistols, you just knew this was it – it had happened.'²²⁰

In turn, the Clash would inspire many other bands. Steve Ignorant of the highly influential Crass, for example, has made it clear that the instant he heard Joe Strummer tell the audience to go ahead and form bands if they thought they could do better than the Clash, he decided to do just that.²²¹ Billy Bragg has proffered the couplet 'year zero' (often applied in this context) to describe his experience of early punk in general and the Clash in particular: 'you just did it yourself. You didn't wait for someone to come and discover you.'²²² We will come back to the idea of punk's alleged 'year zero' shortly. For now, we can observe with interest Bragg's implication that the crucial thing wasn't some magisterial power lying in the hands of the Pistols or the Clash: rather, what was important about seventies punk was the encouragement to 'do it yourself'.

This DiY impetus was certainly a fairly novel element within the rock context. As I have shown elsewhere, commentators on folk music had made reference to 'do-it-yourself' trajectories many years before the Sex Pistols formed.²²³ However, the overwhelming commonality not only of novice/amateur musicianship but also of records being self-released on a shoestring budget is a distinct element arising from seventies punk. As with the lyrical fixation upon the mundanities of everyday life discussed above, this DiY approach was a qualitative break with the earlier rock tradition: never before had so many inexperienced

²²⁰ Heylin, *Babylon's*, p.90

²²¹ George Berger, *The Story of Crass* (London: Omnibus, 2008), p.80.

²²² Quoted in John Robb, *Punk Rock: An Oral History* (London: Ebury, 2006), p.331. Bragg also refers to punk's year zero idea as 'Stalinist', p.530.

²²³ Dale, *Anyone*, p.43.

bands been formed, nor had such an avalanche of self-released music been generated within any previous moment in popular music. The Sex Pistols may not have been a DiY group in the sense that DiY has come to be taken in punk, but they certainly inspired many other bands – even if this was by accident more than by design.

Perhaps we should hesitate here, though. Was the Sex Pistols' *de facto* leadership of the UK's punk explosion *really* just an accident of history? Were they, in other words, fulfilling a role which might just as easily have been filled by some other historical agents? The question is somewhat aporetic, given the undecidable status of 'the great man of history'. It is clear, on the one hand, that the impact of the Sex Pistols upon individuals who witnessed their performances was great. On the other hand, innumerable participants in seventies punk have stated that they were waiting for something like punk to happen; we noted, for example, Clinton Heylin's reference to 'something in the air'. In fact, Heylin's text is rich in comments which support both sides of this conundrum. It is certainly interesting, for example, to note that Patti Smith wrote in 1975 in *Creem* that she had decided to 'refuse to believe Hendrix had the last possessed hand / that Joplin had the last drunken throat / that Morrison had the last enlightened mind'.²²⁴ Since Smith cannot have been aware of the Sex Pistols at that moment, her comments support the 'something in the air' idea. Similarly Mark Perry's statement that in the seventies 'The Rock scene seemed kind of distant – it didn't have anything to do with what was happening' suggests that something like punk was very much needed.²²⁵ What, though, are we to make of Howard Trafford (Devoto) of the Buzzcocks (and later Magazine) insistence that 'The Pistols made me realise how I could express what I was

²²⁴ Heylin, *Babylon's*, p.6

²²⁵ *Ibid*, p.67.

trying to say’?²²⁶ Devoto followed the DiY impetus by deciding that ‘We’ll go back and do something like this in Manchester’. Heylin suggests ‘That sense of impetus would be replicated by audience members in places as far-flung as Hastings, Scarborough, Birmingham, Manchester, Caerphilly, Hendon and Leeds over the next ten months’. Surely, though, it is significant that it was *specifically* seeing the Pistols which led Trafford to believe he could articulate what previously had seemed inexpressible?

The citations in this regard are overwhelming. We know that Strummer was bewitched by the Pistols, later saying that witnessing them for the first time had ‘changed his life’; Siouxsie Sioux, meanwhile, has remarked that ‘I’ll never forget seeing the Pistols’ at the 100 Club; and Tom Robinson echoes Strummer by declaring that seeing them play ‘changed my life’.²²⁷ Martin Bramah of the Fall follows the general mood: ‘suddenly you realized, “Oh, we can do that ourselves”’.²²⁸ He clearly emphasises the aporetic nature of the question as to whether it was the Pistols or the weight of history which brought the punk movement to fruition: ‘It’s hard to say which part of the puzzle slotted into place [after seeing the Sex Pistols] but it was the sheer weight of events – the energy that was coming up’. In the end, Bramah concludes, it was ‘Just that thought – “We can do that” – [which] had so much momentum it carried us through to actually... gig together’.²²⁹

It is hard to believe that a mind as creative as that of Mark E. Smith (Bramah’s bandmate in the Fall) could have lain completely dormant even if a movement like punk had not come along to encourage him. That said, it would also be a mistake to fully dismiss the

²²⁶ Ibid, p.99

²²⁷ Ibid, p.112, p.121, p.122.

²²⁸ Ibid, p.137.

²²⁹ Ibid.

overwhelming number of citations from early converts to seventies punk stating that the Sex Pistols were of pivotal importance. What is most important here, as regards the question of novelty, politics and popular music, is to see that – whether or not the Pistols were puppet-masters or puppets of history – a watershed moment occurred within popular music circa 1976-7. ‘Year zero’, it is often called; an epithet which makes sense insofar as so-called proto-punk (from the Velvet Underground, MC5 and the Stooges to the New York Dolls and Dr. Feelgood) has largely come to be perceived as important *retroactively* (these bands did not sell many records in their day, that is). Proto-punk has gained much of its reputation precisely because it shows some roots for the supposed year zero. Doubtless this means that the year in question was not quite the zero it was supposed to be; but the retroactive importance which has been granted to the proto-punk groups, having been retrospectively activated by the Pistols et al, demonstrates that something pivotal occurred around 1976-7.

It is hoped that it is not necessary, in the present context, to expound the post-structural theories of, for example, Jacques Derrida as regards the impossibility of absolute beginnings: of course there is no such thing without the spectre of anterior traces. However, in terms of popular music, it is equally obvious that there is a perceived break enacted by the seventies punk explosion. There is little or no ambiguity about it: we have seen the citations from individuals who were present at Sex Pistols performances during the period in question. There is, that said, a quite understandable tendency in some recent work on punk to somewhat downplay the importance of the Pistols. I would to some extent count my own efforts within this number. Other examples would include Roger Sabin’s suggestion in *Punk Rock: So What* that ‘the experiences of a 14-year-old punkette from a small Welsh village can be seen as just as “valid” as those of [Sex Pistol] John Lydon’. Then there is Marc Bayard’s complaint in Craig O’Hara’s *The Philosophy of Punk* that ‘The Sex Pistols may have been

important to punk, but were they really worth dozens and dozens of lousy academic and pop culture music books written about them?’²³⁰

Perhaps not, of course. Isn’t the scene around the Sex Pistols rather important groundwork for the subsequent developments which O’Hara is laudably keen to promote, and for the likely attire and music taste of the Welsh punkette, though? The problem, it seems to me – and here I am again critiquing my own previous work, above all – is that the re-arrivals of punk-related micro-subcultures after the seventies repeat many of the core values and aesthetics which were somewhat novel in 1976-7 but which, given these numerous re-iterations, seem to risk repeating the same errors over and over. Think of DiY: I say without hesitation that such self-empowerment is valuable. Surely, though, it does not single-handedly defeat the capitalist system? Surely, that is, we need more than just empowerment of isolated individuals if we are to ‘smash the system’ (assuming that the latter is more than just a catchy, punky slogan)?

Here we arrive at the nub of the core question of the present book: if systemic change is to occur within society, don’t we need something more than repeated instantiations of what has gone before? Perhaps not, of course: later in the book I will explore the idea that the best strategy for the left might in fact be simply (re-)enlarging such that a mass movement demanding a different kind of society can be created, with this enlargement being engendered through unembarrassed repetitions of existing methods (the ‘protest song’, for example, but also the boycott, the sit-in and so on). Looking at the case at hand, however, there is something less than convincing about such a strategy. Take Crass: I have no reason to imagine that Jon Savage is overstating the case when he claims that Crass and the anarcho-

²³⁰ Roger Sabin, *Punk Rock: So What* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.6; Craig O’Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise* (London: AK Press, 1999), p.11.

punk movement substantially reinvigorated the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).²³¹ Isn't it obvious, then, that the anger and novelty of seventies punk brought elements of generational empowerment which could never have been enabled by, say, another Dick Gaughan song combining traditional musical form with a political message?

It is hard to say, but it does seem that seventies punk injected a certain level of politicisation into a large body of the youth of the day. Perhaps the problem, then, is that this level of politicisation was not sufficient to meet the task of smashing the system; we can at least say that *the system* – 'school, army, church, corporation deal', as Crass put it – comfortably survived the heyday of punk.²³² This does not mean that seventies punk, and the various subsequent reiterations of punk over the ensuing decades, were entirely toothless or pointless. It does mean, however, that we need to critically explore the elements of seventies punk which brought limits to the efficacy of the subculture in countercultural terms. Why didn't punk go further in terms of, say, institutional challenge to the music industry and the wider society?

I will explore this question at length in the next section of the present chapter. Firstly, however, I want to expand a little upon positive elements which one can observe within the dramatic arrival of punk in the seventies. One important detail, not mentioned so far, is that it was not only the lucky few attendees of early punk gigs in London for whom this moment had a pivotal power: on the contrary, the impact of the Sex Pistols *et al* was felt far and wide. Mark Anderson accounts powerfully for the importance to him personally of punk in general, and the Sex Pistols in particular, in an introductory chapter within his book (co-authored with Mark Jenkins) *Dance of Days* on punk in Washington DC, for example. Having been a rock

²³¹ Savage, *England's*, p.598.

²³² Crass, 'Banned from the Roxy', *Feeding of the 5000* (Crass), 1978.

fan from the sixties onwards, Anderson mentions that he purchased Patti Smith's debut LP *Horses* in 1975. Aged sixteen at the time, he explains retrospectively that he 'grew up feeling that nothing "fits", especially me.' It's a common feeling amongst individuals who find solace in punk, then and now, I would suggest: 'I was used to feeling at odds with my peers, my world'.²³³

Bravely, I think, Anderson admits that he suffered 'whippings' and beatings at the hands of his parents. The last of these, he reveals, occurred when his mother struck him with a fly swatter 'as was her custom, [whereas] my father tended to use his belt'.²³⁴ Enraged, he grabbed the swatter and destroyed it, instructing her that she must never hit him again. Anderson suggests that he was bordering on being suicidal at this time. However, and significantly for our purposes, an epiphany was imminently due: as a rock fan in 1976, it is unsurprising to learn that Anderson became aware of punk through a music magazine wherein he observed a picture of Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols alongside the caption 'we hate everything'. Despite being far from a nihilist in his subsequent life (Mark Anderson was a co-founder of and key organiser within Washington DC's 'Positive Force' activist collective), this statement struck a chord with him to the extent that, retrospectively, he would declare 'That day was when my life began'.²³⁵

Despite being ostensibly nihilistic, then, the Sex Pistols and punk rock were received as a highly empowering novelty not only in London or the UK but across Europe, the USA and beyond: you could pick up a magazine three or four thousand miles from London and begin

²³³ Mark Anderson and Mark Jenkins, *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001), p.ix.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p.xv.

²³⁵ *Ibid*, p.xvi.

your life again in an instant, allegedly. Are such claims apocryphal? Clearly Anderson's life did not actually begin when the boy looked at Johnny in a *de facto* sense. What is it to be alive, though? If we are to concede some utility to the couplet 'half-life', it might be fair to also concede that punk rock made many people feel alive in a way which they previously had not. Certainly the basic pattern of Anderson's story is not unusual: I have encountered this pattern (young person on the border of despair discovers the punk movement and feels that they are not going mad after all) in countless written accounts of punk as well as through talking to participants in 'the scene(s)'.

To this extent, we can certainly find some political importance in punk. We should also note that there are significantly novel aesthetic elements within punk and punk-descended musics. Some punk bands, of course, are happy to stick to a musical formula. Indeed, some even treat aesthetic formulae as an intrinsically valuable thing: for example, the 'louder, faster, harder' idea, promoted by the influential *Maximum Rock'n'Roll* fanzine in the mid-to-late 1990s as (supposedly) an aesthetic antidote to the rise of 'corporate punk'.²³⁶ From the outset of the seventies punk scene, though, there were efforts towards experimentalism. Consider, for example, Viv Albertine's comments about her formative efforts as a guitarist. Albertine would become the guitar player of first wave UK punk group the Slits. Writing retrospectively (but in the present tense) about her initial efforts at playing the guitar, Albertine states 'I don't want to copy any male guitarists, I wouldn't be true to myself if I did that', adding that 'As I experiment, I find that I like the sound of a string open, ringing away whilst I play a melody on the string next to it' because this 'sounds like bagpipe music or Indian or Chinese, oriental and elemental'.²³⁷ Of course an academic can critique the

²³⁶ See Dale, *Anyone*, p.203.

²³⁷ Albertine, *Clothes*, p.104.

somewhat vulgar ‘Orientalism’ of Albertine’s thinking, here. This, though, would be to miss a far more positive element towards which she is clearly gesturing: that, in her hands, she felt the guitar could produce something both novel and powerful. Her approach is markedly experimental: ‘I love the top three treble strings, the higher up the neck the better, and I turn the treble knob on the guitar and on the amp up full.’ It is also a conscious attempt to challenge tradition and reach for something new: ‘I don’t want to use the same old twelve-bar blues chord progressions that all rock is based on. I can’t anyway, I don’t know the formulas.’²³⁸

Some punk-related bands have been content with such formulas, of course: The Nipple Erectors’ ‘King of the Bop’, or the Clash’s version of ‘Brand New Cadillac’, both of which use twelve bar blues progressions.²³⁹ However, many punk and ‘post-punk’ bands created (and still create, today) very unusual music by employing elements of the neophyte exploration which Albertine sketches above. Sometimes – often, I would argue – punk and post-punk musicians stumble across wonderfully bizarre musical effects, seeming even to benefit from a lack of knowledge. We can note with interest, for example, that Albertine suggests that Keith Levene ‘says he wishes he could write things like [her guitar riffs]; he feels confined by his knowledge’.²⁴⁰ Levene was a close friend of Albertine’s at the time she began learning guitar; he would go on to play in the earliest line-up of the Clash as well as John Lydon’s PiL for many years thereafter. The fact that, previous to his friendship with Albertine, he had roadied for and ‘idolised’ Steve Howe from progressive rock group Yes

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ The Nipple Erectors, ‘King of the Bop’ (Soho), 1978; The Clash, ‘Brand New Cadillac’, *London Calling* (CBS), 1979.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, p.103.

makes it easy to believe that he envied the novice player's basic but innovative style of playing. Some of punk's musical novelty, in Albertine's case but also in many others I would argue, results from conscious decisions about playing-style: 'I hate the note-bending, flashy solos, posturing and lip pursing of a lot of male rock guitarists', she states, and one can observe that the Slits records are free of such approaches to the instrument in question. Some of it, though, is accidental: 'Ari [Slits' vocalist] and I try to emulate Bacharach's classic song structures when we write, but the result is warped because it's filtered through our lack of technical ability... We were trying to write great pop songs, but ended up creating something new by accident.'²⁴¹ The Slits also created something fairly successful in commercial terms, selling many tens of thousands records in the late 1970s. A 2009 review of a solo performance by Albertine revealed that her guitar playing remained 'beautiful and unsettling in its strangeness'.²⁴²

Seventies punk empowered many individuals (including more female instrumentalists than had previously been found in rock music) to pick up instruments and experiment, then. Some of the greatest experimentation occurred after the first wave explosion of the Sex Pistols et al, as Greil Marcus has argued: 'Pushed out of the headlines, punk... became self-consciously experimental.'²⁴³ For some, this more experimental music is best termed 'post-punk', for others it is just punk: this question is somewhat peripheral to our concerns here, however, and I will not dwell upon it at length. What is important, for our purposes, is the fact that 'Punk [or post-punk, if you like] became an avant-garde, a floating centre not only of resistance to

²⁴¹ Ibid, p.207.

²⁴² Ibid, p.364.

²⁴³ Greil Marcus, *In the Fascist Bathroom: Writings on Punk 1977-1992* (London: Penguin, 1993), p.54.

mainstream rock but of serious novelty.’²⁴⁴ I am confident that this is correct. Questions remain, however, as regards punk’s particular combination of novelty and ‘resistance’. For one thing, why did punk stall at ‘resistance to mainstream rock’ when so much of its rhetoric (particular in the ‘anarcho-punk’ movement led by Crass) implied that actual revolutionary politics were in the offing? For another, how much was this resistance reliant upon the ‘serious novelty’ to which Marcus refers? I turn to these core questions in the next section.

Something Better Change

Jon Savage’s summation of Sex Pistols’ manager Malcolm McLaren’s general approach gets straight to the point: ‘Provocation, yes, incitement, no’.²⁴⁵ From a political point of view, this can be read as a damning indictment: McLaren and the Pistols were happy to provoke the authorities, but they stopped well short of inciting organised resistance against the state. Perhaps it is a mistake to expect such a thing from popular music. Punk certainly suggested that something beyond just provocative music was at stake, however. Why, then, did seventies punk – and all punk since, as far as I’m aware – tend to stall at provocation instead of pushing on to incite a more complete smashing of ‘the system’?²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Jon Savage, *Time Travel: From the Sex Pistols to Nirvana: Pop, Media and Sexuality 1977-96* (London: Vintage, 1997), p.19.

²⁴⁶ Penny Rimbaud of Crass, who has fair claim to being punk’s most vehement advocator of revolutionary social change, talked with me in 2007 about Crass’s plan for a march from Sellafield to Westminster in 1984. Having realised that there would be ‘helicopters, riot police and a lot of violence’ and that ‘it would have been [Crass/Rimbaud’s] responsibility’, they opted not to proceed with the march, quoted in Dale, *Anyone*, pp.146-7. Rimbaud acknowledged, without prompting, that this could be interpreted as a ‘failure of revolutionary spirit’. More sympathetically, though, we could also suggest that – as Marxists will say – the revolutionary

Perhaps aesthetics are more important to this stalling process than one might at first think. Consider, for example, Savage's intriguing description of adjourning to the pub with other attendees of the Sex Pistols' famous 1977 jubilee performance on the *Queen Elizabeth* boat on the Thames. With several of their party arrested on dubious charges such as 'Obstructing a policeman' and 'Threatening behaviour', 'we move to this pub where everybody is enacting this weird ritual which involves... "singing" arcane folklore. They want us to join in [but] we can only make silly jokes out of pain'.²⁴⁷ We cannot be sure, from Savage's account, that these arcane folkies were consciously encouraging the punks to consider their resistance within a longer context of peoples' songs. We can say with a fair degree of confidence, however, that seventies punk did not conceive itself as a contribution to long-held struggles. Rather, as we have seen, 1977 was to be a year zero: even when older people with a long-held commitment to the left and to social change 'want us to join in', the punks' commitment to aesthetic novelty means that they just 'make silly jokes out of pain'.

This may be to read too much into Savage's comments, given that the arcane folklorists are not specified by him as having a political agenda of any sort. It is the case, though, that punk wanted to present itself as a break with established vernacular musics (pop, folk, rock and so on) and not to 'join in' with what had gone before, even if these antecedents had shown commitment to social change. It was music for and by the young, in the seventies at least: older commentators and musicians might have shown an interest (Greil Marcus, say, or Bob Marley) but the number of punks in 1977 who had been born before 1952 would be very few,

conditions were not correct and, therefore, a decision to proceed with the provocative march might have incited nothing more than a lot of police brutality with little if any beneficial revolutionary outcome. That given, it is worth emphasising that the present author is not writing with a pejorative attitude towards punk provocateurs; in any case, one must do what one believes is right for the moment.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, pp.18-19.

certainly; the likes of Dee Generate (Roger Bullen) from Eater had been born well into the 1960s, indeed.²⁴⁸ Should the left be pleased when a significant chunk of a whole generation shows a clear and strident demand for change? Certainly, yes; but when that demand is shackled to an equally determined call for radical aesthetics – year zero – the situation becomes more problematic.

The problematic nature of this call is two-fold. Firstly, there are no absolute and pure beginnings in popular music. We saw in chapter one, for example, that ragtime, music hall and rock'n'roll did not come from nowhere and that it is folly to attempt to pick some genuine origin – the 1790s, say – for this area of music. Even in the more musically novel examples of punk such as the Slits, therefore, we find a wide variety of elements (instrumentation, song structure, four-in-the-bar metres and so forth) which have been unmistakably passed down from rock and pop more generally. The second problematic which arises from the year zero idea is more important for our purposes: if the music has to be aesthetically novel, and has to strive for a more and more radical novelty (as seems to have occurred with the shift towards the music which some call post-punk), how can solidarity and a mass movement for change be engendered?

Of course, punk has never been much interested in mass movements, over the decades: indeed, the various sub-genres of punk since the seventies have tended more and more to conceive themselves in opposition to the perceived 'mainstream' (as opposed to demanding to become a new mainstream, which seventies punk to some extent did²⁴⁹). Without a mass

²⁴⁸ Alex Ogg, *No More Heroes: A Complete History of UK Punk from 1976 to 1980* (London: Cherry Red, 2006), pp.219-20.

²⁴⁹ Elements of the indie pop/'cutie'/C86 movement in the mid-to-late eighties sought to create a new mainstream as opposed to always remaining in opposition. As I have shown elsewhere, however, the outcome

movement, however, it is hard to see how any change beyond local, spontaneous and short-lived experimentation could occur. This, of course, is the classic critique of anarchistic thinking which has been common amongst revolutionary socialists from the time of Marx. Our interest in the debate here centres on questions around *individuality*, *choice* and *sustainability*. For the anarchist, it is fair to say that the need for individual freedom trumps any other concern. For the Marxist, however, the anarchistic flash of liberation is unsustainable: because it eschews an organised (party) structure, the anarchist's revolt can never hope for the universal liberation which an effective dissolution of capitalism would require, the Marxist will argue.

I am using the word 'choice' as a place-holder for the negotiation between these spontaneous and individualist (and thus anarchistic) ideals, on the one hand, and the Marxist call for organised and universal revolution, on the other hand. Choice, it seems to me, is always 'the elephant in the room' when Marxist and anarchistic philosophies collide. The Marxist, on the one hand, never seems to tire of terms such as 'correct theory', 'scientific socialism' and 'the final analysis' (an analysis, that is, which is implied to have arisen from a logical and methodical process – in some Marxist tracts, however, I would argue that such logic/method has not been sufficiently employed). The anarchist or anarchistic thinker, meanwhile, seems to neatly sidestep the whole issue of class consciousness which is so crucial the ideas of Marx: for the anarchist, the individual is free to make any choice irrespective of class position, historical situation and so forth. My feeling, partly worked through in my monograph *Anyone Can Do It*, is that a dogmatic class analysis which offered little real choice to culturally-situated subjects (punks, for example) will tend to be highly unappealing

of this aspiration was considerably less appealing in practice than it had appeared in principle, see Dale, *Anyone*, chapter eight and the conclusion to part III.

consequent to a range of factors (obviously including the cessation of full employment, in the seventies). One must add, though, that the reliance on concepts of self-empowerment – the very phrase ‘anyone can do it’ being something of a case in point – is somewhat unconvincing when one looks closely at what transpired not only with seventies punk but also with the numerous re-arrivals of punk in the decades since. Somehow, a third choice (but not the Blairite ‘third way’, obviously) would seem to be needed.

It is not the purpose of the present text to offer a complete solution to this bifurcation of the left (such would be an achievement indeed, given the longevity of anarchist/Marxist tensions). What I think we can note, however, is a slow drift in the West from at least the seventies (but we noted in the last chapter that, actually, this drift goes back at least to the formation of the SNCC and probably beyond) away from Marxism and towards ideals which are not only anarchistic but which are also markedly youth-centred. I would suggest that seventies punk supported and extended this drift, with post-seventies punk only adding to disillusionment with Marxism. To what extent are the practitioners of popular music who call themselves ‘punks’ responsible for this drift, though? We are back to the ‘great man of history’ argument, of course; it may be that the anarchistic character of punk is primarily a product of cultural-historical and socio-economic forces rather than an active response to or creator of those conditions, and to a significant extent this question is undecidable. Some punk and punk-related bands held some faith in Marxist or quasi-Marxist values, in any case: Chelsea’s ‘Right to Work’, for example, clearly emphasises the working class perspective in an era of epidemic unemployment, as do many songs by Billy Bragg and the Redskins in the post-punk 1980s.²⁵⁰ Punk and punk-related songs which emphasise disillusion with the work system as a whole (‘no, I’ve never had a job – because I’ve never wanted one’, as Morrissey

²⁵⁰ Chelsea, ‘Right to Work’ (Step-Forward), 1977.

neatly put it in 1984) are far more common, however.²⁵¹ One can find songs which appear at least dubious about the value of work from earlier moments in popular music history; the Silhouettes 'Get a Job' from 1957, for example.²⁵² However, it is hard to believe that the sharp rise of unemployment in the 1970s was not a significant causative factor for the marked increase of songs querying the value of labour towards the end of the decade. Think of the Specials 'Nite Klub', for example, which declares 'I won't work 'cause I don't have to', adding that 'there's no work to do' in any case.²⁵³

It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the anarchistic tendencies of punk and punk-related music are not purely a product of some generational decision: rather, punk was a response to social changes which were, to at least some extent (a significant one, I would suggest), wrought by much larger and gradually-developing socio-cultural processes. Nevertheless, we can also say that the seventies punk scene (and the various punk-related scenes which have followed it) encouraged large bodies of young people to, for example, focus less on issues of class and industrial exploitation and more upon, say, the importance of accepting 'no authority but yourself' (a slogan thought up by the immensely influential anarcho-punk band Crass). Is this a good thing, given that the old Marxist analyses no longer apply (supposedly) in the late-twentieth and early-twenty first centuries? I anticipate that at least some readers will think so. Who, though, could claim the left as being more powerful and more influential today as compared with, say, fifty years ago? Clearly, then, not everything about the rejection of the old ways – unquestionably a key impetus of punk – has had positive consequences.

²⁵¹ The Smiths, 'These Things Take Time', *Hatful of Hollow* (Rough Trade), 1984.

²⁵² The Silhouettes, 'Get a Job' (Ember), 1957.

²⁵³ The Specials, 'Nite Klub', *The Specials* (Chrysalis) 1979.

What does this tell us about the nexus of popular music and the politics of novelty? Clearly there is no re-winding the clock. Perhaps, though, we should eye the punk movement and its political tendencies/implications a little more sceptically than has been common amongst literature on punk (including some scholarly literature – see the beginning of the next section of the present chapter for some debatable examples). After all, if it is possible for punks, as Conflict claimed in 1984, to ‘pile the pressure on and government will fall’, why is Westminster still standing thirty-odd years later?²⁵⁴ Clearly something has prevented the punk movement from accomplishing this task. I would suggest that the core elements preventing such success are, firstly, a refusal to accept that a serious attempt to make government ‘fall’ would require higher levels of *organisation* and, secondly, a refusal to move on and accept that the twenty first century is very different from the twentieth (and, in Conflict’s case, that punk in 1984 was a very different beast from what it had been in 1976-7). I will discuss the second of these barriers, and our current general situation/prospects, in chapter six below. The first is of greater interest in the context of the present chapter.

Punk encouraged a whole generation to hold faith in the idea that change could arise spontaneously through wilful agency by a minority of key figures (Johnny Rotten, Crass, etc.). No boring meetings or public debates would be required: self-authority would be the only pre-condition for a radicalisation which, in the view of some punk-affiliated commentators, would appear to have already arrived. Why is organisation not required for this revolution? Because punk is a year zero in which revolution itself can be re-invented. I am suggesting, in other words, that the very thing which gave seventies punk its power – the feeling, that is, of being part of a radically new historical moment which could be unshackled, in a flash, from all previous cultural history – was the element which simultaneously made it

²⁵⁴ Conflict, ‘Increase the Pressure’, *Increase the Pressure* (Mortarhate), 1984.

impotent: the tendency to dismiss the existing (socialist, typically) organised struggles against the existing system (capitalism, that is).

What is the solution to this problem? I will offer some suggestions later in the book, placed within a context of consideration of wider debates in twentieth century thought around the tensions between tradition and modernism/novelty. What we can say, with absolute certainty, is that punk did not deliver some of the things about which it spoke, such as anarchy in the UK (although, that said, it was always conditionalised with a ‘sometime... maybe’ in any case).²⁵⁵

What we can also say, with almost as much confidence, is that there is a certain amount to be fought over as regards the legacy of seventies punk. Acres of prose have come into print and yet still some key concepts which punk promoted within popular music more widely are being fudged. A good example of this would be Caroline Coon’s keynote address at the *Riot of our Own* conference on the Clash in Belfast, 20th June 2014. According to Coon, punk bands were ‘accomplished’, ‘lack of skill was not a principle’ in punk and the Clash were ‘extremely skilled’, had ‘exceptional talent’ and were ‘brilliant musicians’ who should not have to fold record sleeves in the manner which so many DiY punk bands would. This, in my view, is a highly revisionist account of punk (even though Coon can legitimately claim to have been close to the heart of the scene as it unfolded in London circa 1976). I would contend, *contra* Coon, that one of the great appeals of punk is that it is *not* accomplished: anyone can do it. Consider, in this context, comments from Mission of Burma guitarist Roger Miller, for example. A student of composition in 1976 producing ‘very complex piano scores and pieces for percussion trios’, Miller ‘was just blown away by these people who could barely play guitar’; although he ‘could play complex pieces by Schoenberg... things like the

²⁵⁵ Sex Pistols, ‘Anarchy in the UK’, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols* (Virgin), 1977.

Sex Pistols meant more to me than complexity'.²⁵⁶ The account is clearly very much at odds with the thinking of Coon, suggesting indeed that lack of skill very much *was* a principle in punk, for some at least (most, I would maintain). We can also query the idea that the Clash were 'brilliant musicians': the vast majority of their songs actually stick rather doggedly to the primary and secondary chords of the major key whilst the guitar work is hardly virtuosic. Wouldn't the Clash's vocalist have adopted the name Joe Shredder or Joe Plucker rather than Joe Strummer if he had considered technical ability to be important in punk?

When Coon proposes that musical ability means that the musician in question should not have to fold record sleeves, it strikes me that she undermines one of the most powerful aspects of the punk tradition. Isn't specialised labour one of the great crimes of capitalism? A musician, I would argue, should also be prepared to bake bread and carry bricks, come the revolution. To ardently emphasise the (alleged) 'musical artistry of the punk movement', as Coon indeed did, is therefore to miss the heart of this area of music's appeal, on my view. Take Puncture's 1977 single 'Mucky Pup', for example.²⁵⁷ This song is much loved by a certain kind of punk fan/collector, including the Exploited who covered it on their notable 1981 album *Punk's Not Dead*.²⁵⁸ 'Mucky Pup' is something of a 'punk classic', many would say – but there isn't much musical nor lyrical 'artistry' involved. The chord sequence (all in major chords, naturally enough for this area of music) runs A-G-C-F#, one bar per chord, straight quavers repeating the root note on the bass almost throughout. There is no guitar solo in the 'break': instead, a theremin fills the gap with what sounds to me to be a deliberately messy and artless improvisation. (It is surprisingly easy for the average person to play

²⁵⁶ Quoted in Simon Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber, 2005), p.465.

²⁵⁷ Puncture, 'Mucky Pup' (Small Wonder), 1977.

²⁵⁸ The Exploited, *Punk's Not Dead* (Secret), 1981.

recognisable tunes on a theremin, hence my employment of the word ‘deliberately’ here.) It turns out, however, that the guitar player *is* capable of something like a conventional break: we hear him bending the strings under the final verse (in which the vocalist dementedly repeats the name ‘Angela Rippon!’ who, it seems, has caused him to realise that he is a ‘mucky pup’). The ‘artistry’ here, then, is of conscious *rejection* of then-standard rock values: the art of deliberate inarticulacy and artlessness. People who like a song like this will like the fact that the singer, with mock sincerity, instructs us that he doesn’t take drugs and has given glue up and, instead, he sniffs people precisely because he’s a ‘mucky pup’. Of course, the song is very stupid; that’s why it sold thousands of records and is still loved today: because punk fans, or at least a significant number of them, love the stupidity which many such bands exhibit (obviously the Ramones were the trailblazers for this).

Coon is representative of a certain trend amongst contemporary retrospective commentators on punk: she, and those who are like her, want to emphasise the ‘exceptional few’ (as she put it) such as the Clash who are supposed to have taken punk to a pinnacle of quality. The trend, I would argue, is largely consequent (in the UK at least) to historical factors: more and more journalists and (more importantly, doubtless) editors are now people who reached puberty in the seventies or the late sixties; a generation which was pubescent in the fifties, and which promoted the sixties as a golden era, is now mostly retired. Because of this, the descriptor ‘classic punk’ is no longer applied ironically, as an amusing contradiction in terms: on the contrary, a whole body of people seem to believe there is no irony in calling, for example, the Clash an ‘accomplished’ band (to use a descriptor applied by Caroline Coon in her keynote speech).

What did the Clash accomplish, then? Certainly not nothing: on the contrary, they had a clear musical appeal and a ‘politicality’, shall we say, which demonstrably inspired a large number of people. The two days I spent at the aforementioned *Riot of our Own* symposium in Belfast

left no doubt in my mind on these two aspects of the Clash's legacy. Indeed, mixing music which a significant body of people enjoy with political views which are significantly inspiring to a fair-sized chunk of the music-enjoying body ('the market', some would call it) is probably a reasonable summation of the overall legacy of punk, on balance. The Clash, like Crass and many other punk and punk-related bands, certainly inspired many to take political action of differing kinds. I have met innumerable individuals who insist that punk set them on a vital path towards self-reliance, critical thought and concrete ideals: countless activists of differing kinds (anti-Nuclear protestors, environmental campaigners, animal rights activists and so on), people who try to 'make a difference' in their everyday lives (by being vegetarian/vegan, or showing tolerance, or challenging intolerance when they encounter it in themselves and in others) and more than one secondary school head teacher.

Punk was not devoid of political impact in the seventies and the decades since, then. It empowered a huge body of post-War youth in a range of ways. It allowed a significant number of young people to cope with pressures which, directly or indirectly, can be related to capitalism (consider, for example, the case of Mark Anderson discussed above, who alleges that his life actually *began* with the Sex Pistols – a born-again punk, then, and far from the only such case I could have described). My complaints herein – for example, that punk has not smashed the system even though its rhetoric typically implies that such can and soon will be easily achieved – are not intended as a dismissal of the political value of the music scene(s) which can be grouped under the word punk, therefore. I did not wish such a dismissal of 'the sixties' in the last chapter, indeed. I do think, though, that we need to consider dispassionately the political possibilities which emerge from popular music: if 'revolution' is to be invoked (and rock has been far from shy of using this word), isn't it fair for us to ask critically what the likelihood is of such an event actually being encouraged by popular music?

A clue here, which reflects an important continuity from the later sixties to the seventies punk movement, are some claims made by Jon Savage with regard to the 1968 involvement of Jamie Reid and Malcolm McLaren (critical figures within the story of the Sex Pistols) in Situationist-inspired activities at Hornsey art school. According to Savage, McLaren and Reid ‘felt themselves challenged and altered by the moment. Once they had drunk of that elixir, the challenge was not only to retain the feeling, but to make it happen again.’²⁵⁹ What is the ‘it’, here? Unmistakeably, I would suggest, the ‘it’ which Savage mentions is a *feeling*: the doubtful reader might check again to note that McLaren and Reid ‘felt’ they had been transformed, wanted to retain this ‘feeling’ and wanted to repeat it. Now, sensibility is important to political agency and political consciousness, without question: Marx noted as much in his *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845, for example. The point, however, is not merely to generate feelings: if revolutionary change is to actually occur, sensibility and agency must be partners (with class consciousness always informing political activity, according to the Marxist paradigm at least).

Seventies punk repeated, for a predominantly younger generation, the feeling that revolution was possible. However, it did not bring a revolution and it is doubtful that it encouraged active revolutionary struggle within the proletariat to anything like the scale which had occurred, for example, in the period between the two World Wars.²⁶⁰ Sensibility, then, would

²⁵⁹ Savage, *England's*, p.30.

²⁶⁰ Matthew Worley has suggested a Communist Party of Great Britain membership in excess of 11,000 for the period between 1926 and 1933, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Great Britain Between the Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris and co, 2002), p.11. This might be a fraction of the number of working class people who bought, for example, records by Crass in the late seventies and early eighties, given that the band sold hundreds of thousands of discs and certainly appealed to many working class young people. However, CPGB membership requires an active and determined commitment for social revolution (see Kevin Morgan, *Gidon*

seem to be the limit of political engagement for many within the punk movement(s) just as it had been, to a significant extent, for many young people in the sixties (we noted, for example, some discussion of a perceived-to-be-important ‘new sensibility’ in the last chapter). In both epochs (if that is the correct word; but the careful reader should realise that I am hinting that hippies and punks may be far less antithetical than the rhetoric on both sides would imply) it was insisted that ‘something better change’ and promised that ‘a change is gonna come’.²⁶¹ The big change – the displacement/replacement of capitalism – never did come, though; not yet, at least. No politicised popular music in the decades since has taken us much closer to this big change, furthermore.

That given, we need to look to the present and the future rather than the past if we are interested in the possibility for popular music to actively and consciously contribute to radical social change. In the next two chapters, I will offer something of a diversion from the somewhat chronological structure taken in the book so far by examining current and relatively-recent philosophical and cultural-theoretical trends and arguments which pertain to

Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991: People of a Special Mould* (London: Rivers Oram, 2007) and Worley is emphatic that ‘party members threw themselves into the midst of the struggle’ of the General Strike, p.10. We can also note that CPGB membership swelled considerably further in the 1930s and further still during the War, Andrew Thorpe, ‘The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–1945’, *The Historical Journal*, 43/3, pp.777-800. We should acknowledge, as a cross reference, that many within the anarcho-punk movement made serious efforts to support the miners during the 1984-5 NUM strike. Overall, though, it is fairly certain that far fewer punks seriously and committedly threw themselves into the heart of the miner’s struggle during the mid-1980s, to stick with this example, compared with the numbers of CPGB members who had been frantically active in the period between the Wars.

²⁶¹ The Stranglers, ‘Something Better Change’ (United Artists), 1977; Sam Cooke, ‘Shake’ b/w ‘A Change is Gonna Come’ (RCA Victor), 1964.

questions around novelty, aesthetics and politics. This theoretical work will set the ground for chapter six, which will bring us to the present, adding suggestions as to possibilities for the future. Before moving on from punk, however, I want to take a close look at two specific musical pieces, as I did in the third section of the last chapter, in order to measure something of the inter-relation between politics and felt-novelty in popular music. The first example has been selected as an exemplar of the first wave punk ‘explosion’; the second as an indicative piece of what many would call ‘post-punk’.

Our Children Will Rise Up Against Us – Like a Brand New Rose in Town

I mentioned above that much literature on punk, including some scholarly work, is too limited in terms of its critical reflection. Rather than highlighting what I consider to be some of the least praise-worthy examples, I want to preface my musical analyses with some reminders as to what is at stake when we reflect critically on punk’s contribution to, shall we say, the popular music of the left. In order to do this, I will very briefly comment upon two scholarly pieces with which, despite my reservations, I share many basic interests and assumptions. Both derive from the *Punkademics* collection of chapters exploring the (often fraught) relationship between punk and academia. The first chapter I want to say something about is Estrella Torrez’s ‘Punk Pedagogy: Education for Liberation and Love’.²⁶² A key moment, on my reading, is Torrez’s statement that ‘Although the media (and *Hot Topic* capitalists) would have us believe that punk is a fashion statement paralleling a brief period of teenage rebellion. In fact, hardcore is both an epistemology (world-view) and ontology (nature of being).’²⁶³ Despite the author’s peculiar decision to break the subordinate clause

²⁶² Estrella Torrez, ‘Punk Pedagogy: Education for Liberation and Love’ in Zack Furness, *Punkademics: The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2012), pp.131-142.

²⁶³ Ibid, p.135.

away as if it were a sentence in its own right, this statement makes sense at least in so far as those within the punk movement tend to think of their ‘scene’. I agree with Torrez that punk is more than a ‘fashion statement’ or, at least, that it can be; but I’m not convinced that it is fully entitled to the discrete status of epistemology/ontology. Perhaps she is right that the DiY approach allows punks to self-determine ‘our personal and collective realities’; again, though, I’m not convinced that such self-determination can be so easily and automatically achieved. Even if she is right about this, though, I have already remarked above that DiY (in a sense which is broadly analogous to the punk context) exists in folk music for decades before punk rock arrives. This being the case, we would need to speak of the epistemological/ontological status of ‘DiY’, not hardcore, surely. Unless punk and hardcore have some unique purchase on their epistemological/ontological strategies, I think it is misleading to apply these terms. My view is that punk/hardcore has no such unique purchase – one doesn’t need to be a punk to take up Food Not Bombs or Books For Prisoners strategies, to squat, to sew one’s own clothing, even to write a fanzine, for example. I would contend, indeed, that the music is in fact the most distinctive thing about punk – and, therefore, it is punk music (and the political implications which seem to follow from it) which I wish to focus on here.

Before attempting to explore that slippery thing ‘the music itself’, however, a second chapter from *Punkademics* merits our consideration in the present context. In his ‘Growing Up Clichéd’, Stephen Shukaitis emphasises many of the same issues which I have discussed above. On his view, it is ‘recuperation’ – whereby capitalism vampirically gorges on ‘any new idea, art form, or energy of social vitality’ – which enables the dominant hegemony to simultaneously neutralise and profit from interventions such as those which have been delivered (repeatedly) by punk.²⁶⁴ ‘Post-punk’, which Shukaitis understands in an explicitly

²⁶⁴ Stephen Shukaitis, ‘Growing Up Clichéd’ in Furness, *Punkademics*, pp.125-9: 127.

Reynolds-influenced sense, ‘arises at the moment where the open space, creativity, and anger unleashed in the space opened up by punk became reduced to self-parody, formula, and unintended recuperation’.²⁶⁵ The structure of this process is clear enough: the ‘open space’/‘space opened up’ feels politically vital, initially, but it quickly gets turned to profit and cultural support for the dominant (capitalist) hegemony. This means that ‘You have to rip it up and start again [the title of Simon Reynolds’ book on ‘post-punk’ between 1978-84] both because of the problem of recuperation and that of falling into creative stasis and stagnation.’²⁶⁶ I think Shukaitis is broadly correct: post-punk (in Reynolds’ sense) and nearly all other post-seventies reiterations of punk to date represent an attempt to evade political recuperation and to avoid aesthetic stagnation. I would go a bit further, indeed: I think that the aesthetic resistance to ‘stasis’ is often interpreted as being effectively *synonymous* with political resistance (Shukaitis implies a link but does not make it explicit). Where I depart from Shukaitis, however, is his assumption that ‘recuperation is inevitable’ and that ‘this is not such a problem’.²⁶⁷ On the contrary, I would suggest that it is an immense problem and, therefore, we must strive for counter-hegemony (a left hegemony, or new ‘historic bloc’ in Gramscian terms, that is²⁶⁸) which directly confronts and defeats capitalism in a manner from which the latter cannot recuperate. Capitalism, in other words, needs to be permanently discredited in the minds of all: only this universal transformation, it seems to me, can defeat the problem of recuperation. Eyed critically, therefore, I fear that Shukaitis veers dangerously

²⁶⁵ Ibid, p.128.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p.127.

²⁶⁸ Quentin Hoare, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

close to an acceptance of capitalism as (in Žižek's striking phrase – worryingly apposite here, I fear) 'the only game in town'.

To clarify, I think that Shukaitis is correct that the post-punk experimentalism of the 1978 to around 1984 period was an attempt to keep punk-related music aesthetically fresh and politically challenging. I also agree that punk has struggled against the dominant hegemony, repeatedly reaching for aesthetic novelty in order to rekindle a political empowerment. This rekindling always becomes necessary because the sense of empowerment gained through novelty (the 'new-sense', as I called it in my monograph on punk *Anyone Can Do It*), being contingent on novelty, cannot be sustained. Shukaitis and I agree about all of this, but we depart at the point where the tug of war between recuperation and rip-it-up-and-start-again novelty is perceived as, on his view, necessary. On my view, by contrast, it is the cycle of empowerment-through-novelty followed by recuperation which needs to be ripped up; and we need to start again thinking differently about the whole relationship between novelty, aesthetics and politics, with popular music being as good a place as any to initiate this reconceptualisation.

I shall attempt to initiate elements of this re-thinking of the politics of novelty, and its relationship with aesthetics, in later chapters herein. For now, I wish to conclude my discussion of the case of punk with some comparative musical analyses, as promised. First, I will discuss 'New Rose' by the Damned, normally said to have been the first UK punk rock single.²⁶⁹ This music was startling in 1976 and remains of interest today, especially in harmonic and timbral terms which I shall elucidate herein. 'New Rose' has been perceived as a watershed record release within popular music history – and yet its novelty alone was

²⁶⁹ Alex Ogg calls it 'the definitive first-mover British punk rock artefact', *No More*, p.178; The Damned, 'New Rose', *Damned Damned Damned* (Stiff), 1977.

insufficient to prevent the music industry and the society at large from recuperating after the initial shock of punk. Second, I shall discuss the Pop Group's 'We Are All Prostitutes' – a 1979 post-punk recording which certainly re-invigorated the political edge of the punk-derived music scene(s) of the day, working against the 'creative stasis and stagnation' of which Shukaitis complains. My selection of these two exemplars is primarily intended to underscore the cycle of innovation and recuperation which Shukaitis and others (including this author) have noted as being endemic to punk.

'New Rose' seems to have been written by Brian James in 1975 for his fledgling band the Subterraneans.²⁷⁰ The band would subsequently morph into the Damned, resurrecting 'New Rose' for their debut single on Stiff records in Autumn 1976. The song had a very new sound, for its day. As with any piece of creativity, the novelty isn't entirely new, however. We can note, for example, that the opening chords (D-B-E-A, all played as major bar chords) recall not only the Ramones but also the whole 'circle of fifths' principle which had provided the harmonic basis for countless popular songs in the sixties, the fifties and long before that. (For the benefit of non-musical readers, the sequence can be understood as a circle of fifths because B is the dominant – chord V, that is – of the E, E is the dominant of the A, and A is the dominant of the D, thus *functional tonality* has been unmistakably applied in this intro.) More than likely it was the Damned's practical consciousness of the traditional pop song character of these opening chords which led them to kick the song off with a line quoted from the Shangri-Las.

However, what follows the twelve bar intro (four bars of emphatic quavers on the floor tom with crotchets on the rack tom, accompanied by the guitar chords described above for the remaining eight bars) is novel in several ways. For one thing, the raw timbres of the drums

²⁷⁰ Ibid, p.175.

and the guitar: by 1976, most recordings were delivered with painstaking clarity and if ‘New Rose’ recalls some ‘rough and ready’ production values which can be reasonably compared with sixties records, the heightened rawness of ‘New Rose’ (for example, the ultra-distorted hi-hats at the close of the song) nevertheless has no obvious precedent in earlier mainstream pop. Also, the odd length of the segue from the intro to the song’s main riff: although essentially a simple addition of a single four beat bar, the positioning of the snare flourish across the end of one bar and the beginning of the next, followed by a decidedly guttural ‘Ah!’ (or should that be ‘Ugh!’?) from the vocalist on beat two of the added bar, makes this segue a highly distinctive clarion call in the popular music context. Thirdly, and most importantly perhaps, the riff itself: beginning with an anacrusis ‘borrowed’ from the end of the added bar at the end of the introduction, this riff has a harmonic character with no clear precedent in any popular music prior to 1976.

Given the boldness of the claim I have just made on behalf of Brian James’s composition, it is worth dwelling on the character of the guitar chords which have been used here.

Maintaining the intro’s major-bar-chords-only strategy (possibly inspired, in part at least, by the debut Ramones LP which had come out earlier that year), the chords F#-G#-E are the heart of this riff. In a way, this sequence makes sense if we take E major as the tonic: the riff would then be a simple II-III-I with only the major voicing of the II and the III being a bit surprising (ii-iii-I would be more obvious, given that the major scale implies I-ii-iii-IV-V-vi as the ‘logical’ harmonic sequence of primary and secondary chords). There is a problem here, though. If E is the tonic then why did the intro begin on D and use functional tonality to repeatedly and unswervingly lead us back to the D? If D were the tonic, that said, then the main riff would be III-bV-II – a bizarre sequence by any standards.

The ‘correct’ solution to this puzzle, from the standpoint of standard harmonic analysis, is probably to declare that the song modulates from D (in the intro) to E (for the main riff,

which is also the background basis of the chorus later in the song). Can super-tonic modulations of this type be found in other (earlier) example of popular song? Certainly, but not with a performative/harmonic character quite like this. One can, of course, find modulations up a semi-tone or whole-tone in pre-punk popular music: typically, though, this will involve repetition of the same harmonic material in the new key rather than introduction of new and harmonically ambiguous material subsequent to the modulation. We might even interpret the ‘Ugh!’ mentioned above as revulsion at the old fashioned circle of fifths featured in the introduction, with the new and tonally ambiguous sound of punk arriving in a new key directly after this guttural interjection. I am also confident that the next harmonic gesture – C major to A major as the basis of the verse – has no clear precedent in popular song. This is not to say that pop songs never utilise comparable shifts at all – the Beatles’ ‘Mean Mr. Mustard’ springs to mind as a similar transposition of a major chord up and down a three semi-tone interval, for example. What is odd in ‘New Rose’, however, is the use of C major when, thus far, we had held D major and E major as our two possible tonic chords: C belongs in neither of these keys. The bridge sequence – A-B-C# – only compounds our harmonic confusion: if E is the tonic in the main riff, as seems to be the case, then these A and B major chords make good sense; but the additional move up to C#, in that case, would be rather peculiar, at least in a popular music context.

In short, then, we can say that ‘New Rose’ is a very unusual song in harmonic terms, as well as being timbrally interesting. In the words of Nick Lowe, who produced the recording for Stiff, it has ‘a cracking riff, absolutely watertight’; the overall song, he suggests, is ‘startlingly original, it’s an ancient story somehow told in a brand new way’.²⁷¹ I am in broad agreement with this: despite using old tools (the circle of fifths, the major triad, the eight bar

²⁷¹ BBC, *Punk Britannia*, episode 2, 55 mins.

phrase, and so forth), the song remains striking today and evidently seized the attention of a sizeable audience when first issued. Some other first wave punk songs are less interesting harmonically – the bulk of the Sex Pistols’ and the Clash’s material, for example, which largely bows to the tradition of functional tonality – and some is equally peculiar.²⁷² Overall, what is widely agreed upon is that the seventies punk sound established by the UK’s first wave lost a degree of impetus by around 1978 for a large body within the available audience, many of whom sought a more innovative and experimental musical content. The latter constituency is certainly not representative of the entire audience for punk at that moment. As Matthew Worley has shown, for example, a mass audience for ‘Oi!’ punk emerges around the same time as the experimentally-orientated bands grouped under the banner of post-punk; and this Oi! scene is normally understood to have been explicitly opposed to ‘the arties’.²⁷³ However, the experimental set of late seventies and early eighties bands often grouped as post-punk are of interest for our purposes because they set a template for successive, novel re-imaginings of punk: the perceived need for repeated re-birthing and renewal which can also be recognised with the rise of anarcho-punk, of ‘cutie’ (or ‘twee pop’/‘C86’/‘indie pop’), of riot grrrl, of math rock and so forth.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Another good example of harmonically peculiar first wave punk would be ‘Boredom’ by the Buzzcocks. E-G-A-F#-B runs the verse, all played using major chords. The chorus, meanwhile, sits on C major for two bars, returns to B and then diverts, bizarrely, from F to Eb to Bb. These last three chords are surprising because they seem to suggest modulation to Bb major, an odd key given the verse’s rootedness to E. We can also note that ‘Boredom’ touches ten of the available notes within the dodecaponic series, with only Db and Ab left unmolested – shades of Schoenberg appear within this popular song, one could therefore suggest.

²⁷³ Matthew Worley, ‘Oi! Oi! Oi!: Class, Locality and British Punk’ in Jon Garland et al, *Fight Back: Punk, Politics and Resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp.34-64: 38.

²⁷⁴ For more on these four particular examples, see Dale, *Anyone*.

Bristol's The Pop Group are as paradigmatically post-punk as any group is, I would suggest, and I therefore offer now some analyses of their landmark 1979 single 'We Are All Prostitutes'. What, at that moment in popular music history, made a record like this so different, so appealing? Certainly the lyrics are important, suggesting that a future generation will rise up against those (all of us, the song implies) who have accepted capitalism as a new (and ultra-barbaric) religion. However, I wish to focus primarily here upon the sonic element – the music itself, as they say – because this, it seems to me, is constitutive of the felt-need for a renewal of punk around two years after the early singles such as 'New Rose'.

What, in the case of 'We Are All Prostitutes', is different from 'New Rose'?²⁷⁵ One obvious element is the essentially static harmony of the former piece: where we noted regular modulations of implied tonic root in the Damned's song, the Pop Group anchor themselves to (roughly speaking) A minor throughout. This is not to say that there is no diversion whatsoever from the A root: the section which bridges the second 'chorus' (if this is the correct word; the second section based around the song title, that is) and the second 'verse' (in which capitalism is described as an ultra-barbaric religion) is rooted to G, as are some other moments in the song. However, this G-orientated bridge functions as an interruption of the A-based majority of the song and is best described, I would argue, as a tonally contrasting development section rather than as an actual modulation (we expect the A root to return, I suggest, and indeed it soon does). This is very different from 'New Rose', where it is impossible for us to confidently say that D, E or C are the absolute tonic precisely because all three of them feel like 'home' at different points in the song.

This is not to say that there is no harmonic interest within 'We Are All Prostitutes'. On the contrary, guitar, bass, saxophone and violin are used to corrupt the purity of an implied A

²⁷⁵ The Pop Group, 'We Are All Prostitutes' (Rough Trade), 1979.

minor. For example, there is a regular appearance of Eb which, as the flattened fifth above A, sounds far from 'normal' in harmonic terms. Likewise the guitar line, heard at several points, which descends B-A-G-F#: since F natural would be used in the Aeolian and harmonic A minor scales whilst F# would only be used in ascent for the melodic A minor scale, the prominence of this F#, at the end of the descending guitar phrase, is a notable disruption of functional tonality (the tonality, that is, which most of us 'internalise' whether or not we are familiar with the terminology of European notated music). The saxophone, which arrives at the closure of the second chorus, is unmistakably played by someone well-versed in the squeals and upper-range squeaks which became standard in 'free' jazz well over ten years before this record was made: again, then, functional tonality is symbolically challenged. The second verse, immediately after this, features a highly avant-garde cello part which troubles the status of C natural (the minor third of the A scale) and which seems somewhat gleeful in the rough timbres of the bowing.²⁷⁶

From the very first (and difficult to describe) sounds – a few bizarre-sounding mumbled words, a drum roll and a from-high-to-higher glissando, that is – 'We Are All Prostitutes' comes across as a highly peculiar piece of music. In harmonic terms, however, it offers fewer unusual ambiguities and peculiarities than 'New Rose'. What is the significance of this? By

²⁷⁶ Gareth Sager of the Pop Group has indicated that the cellist in question is Tristan Honsinger. For Sager, free improvisation was 'more exciting than punk, no question about it', according to an interview with *Rolling Stone* published on November 7th 2014. Because he 'wanted to inform the world about' such 'amazing musicians who blew my mind completely' he decided to have 'no more five-chord songs. Throw the chords out the window!'. Clearly, then, the static harmony of 'We Are All Prostitutes' relative to 'New Rose' is no accident of history: the Pop Group consciously turned away from punk's relatively closer relationship to the longer tradition of popular song and turned towards avant-gardism with a high level of consciousness and determination.

1979, I would argue, punk (or post-punk, as many would delimit the Pop Group's oeuvre) was no longer being designed to create a new kind of rock based on novel (and neophyte) re-imaginings of the possibility of harmonic structure as canonised in popular song up to that time. Rather, after punk's first flush of creativity, the new bands wanted to reject popular song *tout court* and to be 'dissident aesthete[s] "on the run to the outside of everything"' (as Simon Reynolds puts it, with reference to an influential post-punk song by Magazine).²⁷⁷ As noted above, the Oi! scene was developing a constricted and somewhat conservative vision of what punk should be around the same times as the post-punk arties were working towards a more avant-garde aesthetic. The general understanding of this bifurcation within punk – from Oi! to post-punk, which can be reduced to a battle between traditionalism and avant-gardism – is that the post-punk bands were more artistically adventurous whilst the essentialist punk bands (not only the Oi! groups but also many of the anarcho-punk bands as well as many 'new wave' groups which can be broadly classified within the punk umbrella) were less artful. A key question arising from this is as to what 'artful' means, of course. From the post-punk perspective, I would suggest that artistry is configured as a constant search for radical novelty, for the previously-unthinkable, for 'constant change, avoidance of stale conceits, doing the unacceptable'.²⁷⁸ The more essentialist punk bands, by contrast, were typically conservative: studied artlessness became core to their identity. Despite this, a song like the Cockney Rejects' 'Flares 'n Slippers' (issued the same year as 'We Are All Prostitutes') manages to be somewhat artful about its blatant artlessness: the entry point of the vocal line on the major third of the tonic chord, for example, is nicely done and has its own character

²⁷⁷ Reynolds, *Rip*, p.21.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.18.

despite the felt-familiarity of the piece in a punk context; we can say much the same of the VI-V harmony in the chorus.²⁷⁹

The significance, then, of the tension between ostentatiousness novelty in a post-punk track such as ‘We Are All Prostitutes’, on the one hand, and a more ‘conservative’ punk sound as in ‘Flares ’n Slippers’ (which harks back to the neophyte construction of ‘New Rose’ with, again, the VI-V harmony in the chorus), on the other hand, is that the former wears its novelty on its sleeve whereas the latter song-type has a less marked avant-gardism. Can we take this difference as being indicative of a *political* difference? I would suggest otherwise. For one thing, there could be legitimate reasons for understanding the essentialist approach to punk – common in 1979 but also remaining influential upon, for example, the approach to punk taken up by *Maximum Rock ’n’ Roll* fanzine in the 1990s, as discussed above – as having an important political edge: for example, the Oi! scene can be understood as a highly class-conscious movement lending a valuable identity to a section of society (the white working class) which, then and now, is prone to ‘demonization’.²⁸⁰ We have already noted that many anarcho-punk bands were less avant-gardist than the post-punk milieu, furthermore – but it is doubtful that a greater or more direct concern with political issues could be demonstrated

²⁷⁹ Cockney Rejects, ‘Flares ’n Slippers’ (Small Wonder), 1979.

²⁸⁰ Worley, ‘Oi!’, p.54: Worley suggests that the common dismissal of Oi! as racist and thuggish is not entirely justified and can be understood as an early example of the demonization of the white, British working class written of more recently by Jones, Owen, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2011).

within the latter sub-genre of punk-related music (quite the opposite is likely the case, I would suggest).²⁸¹

There is a more subtle level to this question of ‘political’ difference, we can add. Punk predicates itself on a sense of identity through otherness.²⁸² This identity is somewhat contradictory given that the punk says ‘I’m just me’ in a *group*.²⁸³ Do post-punk groups somehow circumnavigate this problem, though? The ‘constant change’ which is searched for in much of the music which falls under this banner is chimerical, I would argue: the utterly individual avant-gardist would need to turn and turn and turn, again and again, in order to methodically strive for such a thing. One need not study Hegel at much length, however, to see that this presentation of a supposedly unique identity, in order to *be* identified, would have to be in a relationship with the thing which it negates. Constant change doesn’t really leave any ground for art, in the end, therefore.

Chapter Conclusion

Must we pick between essentialist punk (where the ‘New Rose’ template would be about as ‘far out’ as the musicians dare go) and post-punk (where the *raison d’être* is to reach the permanent outside of everything – as if ‘everything’ could have an outside)? I would suggest

²⁸¹ I am confident, for example, that more of the bands covered in Ian Gasper, *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980-1984* (London: Cherry Red, 2006) can be shown to discuss concrete political issues in their lyrics than the bands covered in Reynolds’ *Rip It Up and Start Again*. We can note with interest that both books make a titular claim to coverage of a similar period, however; both, that is, seem to imply that punk is best before 1984.

²⁸² See Laura Way, ‘Playing A-minor in the Punk Scene?: Exploring the Articulation of Identity by Older Women Punks’ in Garland et al, *Fight Back*, pp.65-76, for example.

²⁸³ Howard Devoto of Magazine quoted in *ibid*, p.74.

that such a framing of the thinkable aesthetic options is both erroneous and damaging: there is a great deal more complexity to the actual creative choices which musicians make, including punk musicians. Particularly damaging, here, is the implication that aesthetic avant-gardism is necessarily more politically radical than an aesthetic which is comfortable with elements of tradition. I will discuss the political, philosophical and musicological issues arising from this claim in the remainder of the book. As regards the tradition of punk, I want to repeat that the somewhat emblematic comparison I have made between the first wave of British punk (as exemplified by the Damned's 'New Rose') and the subsequent avant-gardist groups sometimes grouped as post-punk (as exemplified by 'We Are All Prostitutes') is a blueprint for much of what follows in the decades-long punk tradition. The basic pattern is as follows: novelty, ossification, stagnation, new novelty; accompanied, at all times, by an 'old school punk' essentialism which reifies the '77 punk' of the Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Damned, amongst others.

This process of novelty and ossification has been repeated *ad nauseam* in punk, arguably: 'The new music is here, and it's here to stay', as influential US punk fanzine *Touch and Go* once put it.²⁸⁴ We should remember, however, that each modification to the possibilities of punk is felt by participants to be an important 'new-sense' moment, to use the couplet I offered in *Anyone Can Do It*. A certain feeling of empowerment arises from this new sense, and it is worth something without question: we noted above, for example, that the Sex Pistols gave many individuals a pivotal sensation of their lives having literally begun in the moment they encountered the band. This empowerment has been re-ignited by punk bands, over and

²⁸⁴ Michael H. Carriere, 'Touch and Go Records and the Rise of Hardcore Punk in Late Twentieth-Century Detroit', *Cultural History* 4/1, pp.19-41: 26. 'Fuck the past. Support the new' is also revealed to have been a *Touch and Go* slogan, *ibid*.

over. However, capitalism itself remains impervious to serious harm from the punks, it seems. For this reason, I suggest that punk's political contribution to popular music is interesting, important and worth discussing but – 'in the last analysis' – it is not sufficient to 'fuck the system', despite the common punk claim to such an ambition. We need to look forwards, not only backwards, if we are to search for an end to the capitalist system. Does this mean that we must have radical aesthetic novelty in popular music? Perhaps not; in the case of punk, we can at least observe that anarcho-punk, which offered some of the most politically challenging rhetoric to have emerged within the punk tradition, is not the most aesthetically radical music this tradition has produced. In any case, I would suggest that the word 'punk' will not be valuable, in the end, for a new and revolutionised society: in a classless system, for example, there can be no punks (for if all are punks then none are).

What we can say positively, I think, about the tradition(s) of punk is that, as a rule, they have encouraged people who have not played music before to pick up an instrument and have a try. This, it seems to me, is significantly in contradistinction to the general expectations and pressures of late capitalist society. Rather than buy records, why not make one? Rather than buy concert tickets (which have never been anything like as expensive in the past, relative to the price of a loaf of bread, as they are on average today, I would suggest), why not play a gig yourself? Rather than read *Mojo* or *NME*, why not write a fanzine? These kinds of self-empowerment, which the punk scene(s) have clearly prompted, encourage people to produce rather than just to consume; to be creative and not just to respond to the stimuli thrown forth by a market-driven music industry. We noted above the level of creativity and imaginative exploration enacted by Viv Albertine during the first wave of UK punk, when she played guitar in the Slits. We can add that her recent gigging as a solo performer and fifty-something mother remains highly 'punk', in the eyes of at least one reviewer: 'one of the punkest things I have ever seen... a middle-aged woman singing about the trappings of motherhood,

traditions and marriage. A woman who isn't trying to please or nurture anyone, but who illuminates a lifestyle that's so ubiquitous as to be rendered nearly invisible.'²⁸⁵

'Come the glorious day', then, perhaps the DiY impetus of punk – DiY being the most important thing about punk, I would argue – can be spread so widely, across generations and social 'types' (the mother, the worker, the 'black' and so forth), that this word 'punk' becomes no longer so important. What I think we should undoubtedly hope for, overall, is a society where it is not only one small group of 'talented great artists' who get to do the creative work whilst others merely watch and listen; instead, creative options are available for all. Not everyone can make music as good as Viv Albertine did both in the Slits and in her solo work today, I imagine. We should all be afforded space – or empowered to demand space – for creativity in our lives, however; for what could a revolution be worth without creative empowerment of us all? Not everyone wants to make music, presumably; but we should all be entitled to explore this field of human activity, in an active manner, if we wish: without this, I suggest, a 'revolution' could not be sufficiently revolutionary for the root and branch transformation which society so desperately needs.

Punk and punk-related musics have taken the popular field much closer to an inclusive basis; closer to this ideal, at least, than the popular music of the sixties did. However, in the long run, many 'legendary' punk and punk-related bands from 'back in the day' are lauded today to a problematic extent. Even the relatively obscure bands which appeared on *NME*'s 1986 compilation cassette *C86* (which I argued in *Anyone Can Do It* can be regarded as falling within the traditions of punk), for example, have been re-forming in recent years and playing to audiences which are, in some cases at least, larger than those for which they originally performed. Is this a problem? Not necessarily, perhaps, but it does risk lionising the 'greats'

²⁸⁵ Quoted in Albertine, *Clothes*, pp.363-4.

of the underground – an intrinsically oxymoronic thing to do, because the underground is generally supposed to offer a haven for art which is valuable despite not being ‘great’.

Another risk which arises when the DiY/punk underground fixates strongly upon the classics from back in the day is the (re-)production of a somewhat postmodern tendency: the sense that it has all been said before and cannibalisation of past glories is the best which can be achieved in the twenty first century.

Rather than follow a chronological pattern for the next chapter, therefore, I want to step in to a more theoretical mode for much of the remainder of the book. Certainly popular music has seen many changes and creative developments over the decades since the seventies. I would contend, though, that the question as to the political importance of the presentation (or otherwise) of a felt-novelty has never been satisfactorily answered in academia nor in more vernacular contexts. In order to begin to address this question more directly, it is natural, I think, to begin by discussing issues around modernism, postmodernism and the whole debate as to whether popular music is or even ought to be ‘pushing the envelope’ in the twenty first century. Such, then, is broadly our topic for the next chapter.

Chapter Four: The Postmodern Turn, Turn, Turn

In his 1957 historical novel *The Leopard*, Tomasi di Lampedusa placed a memorable phrase into the mouth of one of the central characters within his tale: ‘*Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi*’ (if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change).²⁸⁶ It is a concession which conservatives must often make when faced with pressure for revolutionary change within a particular moment of historical crisis (the *Risorgimento*, in

²⁸⁶ Tomasi Di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1957), p.21.

Lampedusa's story): conceding a small change can be felt as a necessity in order for the conservative to retain the bulk of the hegemony he has hitherto enjoyed.

During the moment in which Lampedusa published this novel, the modernist ideal was entering something of a revival sometimes referred to as the 'late modernist' period. The combination of the terms 'modernism' and 'revival' is somewhat oxymoronic, of course; and yet we can observe that it was precisely this irony which preoccupied many intellectuals during the fifties and sixties: the title of Harold Rosenberg's *Tradition of the New* is merely the most obvious invocation of a paradox which preoccupied many thinkers during the era in question.²⁸⁷ In the view of Michael North, 'The status of revolution is perhaps the defining paradox of the 1960s debate about the nature of novelty, the modernist tradition of the new, and the status of the newest art.'²⁸⁸ Our interest in this overall paradox is primarily due to the tendency for this tradition of the new to influence a great deal of practice and principle within the popular music field. An assumption has been maintained by many commentators and practitioners today (despite the widespread intervention of postmodernist ideas and methods) that what is new will necessarily be politically radical (and, conversely, that what is familiar/traditional will be politically conservative). It is the purpose of the present book to query this assumption. Within this effort, it is the purpose of the present chapter to provide an overview of 'high' modernist practice and principle; to contrast this against late modernist tendencies and conflicting ideas within the modernism which arose in and around the sixties; and, in the third and final section, to explore issues arising from the 'postmodern turn' which is said to have followed the sixties.

²⁸⁷ Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1960)

²⁸⁸ North, *Novelty*, p.200.

The relationship between these wider trends and perceived movements within art history, on the one hand, and the politicality (as it were) of popular music, on the other hand, will appear and reappear as something of a spectral theme throughout the chapter. As acknowledged above, however, we are entering now a more ‘theoretical’ level in the present book in which wider issues around the politics of novelty must be considered in order to allow our application of these more general issues to the particular case of popular music. It is hoped, nevertheless, that the importance of these theoretical issues upon our consideration of popular music will be evident. It would be impossible, in any case, to properly consider popular music and the politics of novelty without discussing the largest paradigms relating to the questions of novelty, politics and popular culture, namely modernism and postmodernism. I begin, naturally enough, with the question of modernism not only in its ‘high’ moment but also, in the second section of the chapter, its ‘late’ return in and around the sixties. What, politically, was at stake within the perceived call to ‘make it new’? What was achieved by the radical novelty of modernism and what, politically, were the pitfalls of the widespread desire for the shock of the new? To what extent has postmodernism moved beyond modernism? How well does the history of popular music ‘map on’ to the high and late modernist periods and the concept of postmodernism, overall? These are the core questions for our consideration in this chapter.

Burn down the museums... or don’t.

Michael North has shown, with admirable rigour, that the phrase ‘make it new’ actually arrives very late in the high modernist period (1928). The phrase also is not perceived as a slogan until the 1950s and, in any case, is not at all intended by Ezra Pound (the author of the perceived slogan, more or less) as a call to arms (quite the opposite, indeed, North suggests). As a matter of fact, Pound was paraphrasing an ancient Chinese saying when he put these three words together. As North emphatically demonstrates, ‘Make It New was not itself new,

nor was it ever meant to be'; the form of the (perceived) slogan is 'recombinant' and reflects Pound's explicit desire to, in his words, 'heap together and arrange and harmonize the results of many men's labour'.²⁸⁹ No lesser an architect of modernist sensibilities and methods than T. S. Eliot, writing to Pound on behalf of publishers Faber in the mid-1930s, actually queried the latter's 'new title MAKE IT NOO' on the basis that 'we may have missed subtle allusion but if we do I reckon genl [sic] public will also'.²⁹⁰

The idea that high modernism was primarily orientated towards a dogmatic 'determination to make it new' may well be a perversion of the core sensibilities of its principal architects, then.²⁹¹ North suggests, indeed, that the perversion in question arises – unwittingly, perhaps – within the ideas of the late modernists of the fifties and sixties. Discussion of the dominant ideas and tendencies within the latter period must be postponed until the next section of the present chapter, however. For now, our concern is primarily to explore the politics of novelty in the high modernist period and its relationship to the field of popular music and, more generally, the rapid rise of popular culture within the same approximate period.

Where does modernism begin? Let us assume a general and hopefully not too contentious approximate origination in the later decades of the nineteenth century: in painting, a slow drift away from pure representational endeavours, in prose, a steady increase of freedom of verse and of imagery, in music, an increasing appearance of dissonance and a growing rejection of functional tonality, and so on. This summary, though reductive, can hopefully be accepted as a broad sketch of some of the strongest tendencies one finds in modernism. All are occurring, of course, just as the music halls are reaching their peak of popularity, the

²⁸⁹ Ibid, p.168.

²⁹⁰ Quoted in *ibid*, p.169.

²⁹¹ Ibid, p.170.

ragtime 'craze' is beginning to emerge and jazz and blues are also developing at a rapid pace (to refer back to some developments discussed in chapter one above), not to mention the arrival of the 'trivial' novel and, of course, the camera.

Can modernism be figured as a facile and hostile response to the rise of popular culture, then? Such a configuration would, I think, be far too over-simple.²⁹² For one thing, focussing on the musical manifestations of modernism, it is evident that some late nineteenth/early twentieth century popular music won the admiration of key modernist practitioners. Many readers will be familiar with Debussy and Stravinsky's dalliances with ragtime and the cakewalk form, for example. Perhaps less well known is T. S. Eliot's declaration that Marie Lloyd was 'the greatest musical hall artist of her time in England'; he is unequivocal in his enthusiasm for her 'art', also praising Nellie Wallace and Little Tich.²⁹³ We can note with interest, that said, Eliot's favourable comparison of such music hall practitioners with the 'continuous senseless music... too rapid for the brain to act upon' of the cinema: on his view 'The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in on the chorus was himself performing part of the act' whereas the cinema-goer is a passive spectator.²⁹⁴

It seems fair, then, to suggest that modernists were neither wholly in favour of nor wholly opposed to the emergent forms and tendencies of popular culture. What would Eliot have made of the singing along on the chorus which has been common at rock and pop concerts

²⁹² We can note that Raymond Williams also is dubious about such a configuration, suggesting that 'The hostility of... modernist culture to the characteristically fixed and enclosed forms of the *established* culture was intense' whereas it is 'much harder to analyse... [the] very complicated relations to the forms of *popular* culture', Williams, Raymond, *What I Came To Say* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), p.142, emphasis added.

²⁹³ Eliot, T.S., *Selected Prose* (London: Faber, 1975), pp.172-3.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.174

during more recent decades? Since we cannot know, it is perhaps best not to speculate. What is certain, though, is that – arrogant though Debussy and Stravinsky may have been to assume that they could easily assimilate the musical characteristics of emergent African-American popular music – modernists were certainly not only reacting against the rise of popular forms. Moreover, they were developing, in Meyer Schapiro's words, 'new possibilities of imaginative representation' and 'a new attitude to art itself': an attempt to develop 'wholly new fields of form-construction and expression' which were as much a reaction to the established modes of art as a reaction to the rapid growth of popular culture.²⁹⁵ Despite Schapiro's incantation of the word 'new' in the comments just quoted, we can note with interest that he adds an insistence that the novelty in question 'made possible the appreciation of many kinds of *old art and of the arts of distant peoples* – primitive, historic, colonial, Asiatic and African, as well as European'.²⁹⁶

Perhaps, then, the modernists were just as interested in widening the available palette of European artistry as they were interested in novelty for novelty's sake. Indeed, Schapiro is emphatic that 'The history of art is not... a history of single wilful reactions, every new artist taking a stand opposite the last, painting brightly if the other painted dully, flattening if the other modelled, and distorting if the other was literal'. On the contrary, he argues that 'The reactions were deeply motivated in the experience of the artists, in a changing world with which they had to come to terms and which shaped their practice and ideas in specific ways.'²⁹⁷ In the modernist period 'The idea of art was shifted, therefore, from the aspect of imagery to its expressive, constructive, inventive aspect', Schapiro argues; '*That does not*

²⁹⁵ Schapiro, Meyer, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1982), p.215.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, emphasis added.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.191.

*mean, as some suppose, that the old art was inferior or incomplete, that it had been constrained by the requirements of representation.*²⁹⁸ Rather, he suggest, ‘a new liberty had been introduced which had, as one of its consequences, a greater range in the appreciation and experience of forms’: a novelty, that is, of expressive options rather than the hysterical and radical novelty which some accounts of modernism propose as the central ‘make it new’ ideology.²⁹⁹

The nuance of this understanding of high modernism is vital for our purposes. If Schapiro is to be believed (and North is much in agreement, we might add), the core intention of late nineteenth/early twentieth century modernist art was *not* to destroy the past but, rather, to open up possibilities which, within the European art traditions, had been previously unthinkable. Of course we must acknowledge that some within the modernist milieu – the Futurists are the classic example, of course – insisted that we should reject the past even to the extent of burning down the museums. It would be a gross error, however, to assume that such hysterical pronouncements form an adequate overview of modernist values. Let us consider, by way of contrast, the famous written correspondence between the painter Wassily Kandinsky and the composer Arnold Schoenberg at the height of early twentieth century modernism. The latter remarks emphatically that ‘we do not like Beethoven because of his style, which was new at the time, but because of his content, which is always new’.³⁰⁰ ‘Naturally, for someone who otherwise hears nothing in a work, a modern style is a convenient means of establishing a relation with the author’, the composer goes on to say; ‘But that doesn’t give me much joy. I would like people to take notice of *what* I say, not how

²⁹⁸ Ibid, p.216, emphasis added.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Arnold Schoenberg and Wassily Kandinsky, *Letter, Pictures and Documents* (London: Faber, 1980), p.60.

I say it!’³⁰¹ Kandinsky also is dubious about the new, on balance: ‘I am very pleased that you speak of self-perception. That is the root of the “new” art, of art in general, which is never new, but which must only enter into a new phase – “Today!”.’³⁰²

We can note with interest, here, that the composer suggests great art is ‘always new’ whereas the painter proposed that ‘art in general... is never new’: clearly, then, high modernism had a degree of pluralism in terms of the understanding of the nature and importance of novelty from the point of view of its key practitioners. Most important, for our purposes, is that for one the ‘new phase’ is connected to the broader tradition of ‘art in general’ whilst for the other a great classical artist is always providing us with novel content: for both, in other words, the novelty of modernism relates directly to tradition rather than providing an absolute break with the past.

For consistency and rigour, let us turn to another salient figure of high modernism: Bertolt Brecht. Again we find that a radical novelty divorced from all tradition is not being sought: ‘The activity of great art is reproductive... It is indeed creative to produce real chaos, but the process of making art does not tend to shape anew the elements thus obtained according to a new image of the whole, but tends merely to put them together in the old way.’³⁰³ Here and elsewhere, we see a high level of subtlety in Brecht’s thought with regard to the relationship between novelty and tradition: although he ‘started in literature and theatre with old, conventional forms’, subsequently ‘the struggle caused me to reach out for new forms’.³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Ibid, emphasis retained.

³⁰² Ibid, p.25.

³⁰³ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Art and Politics* (London: Methuen, 2003), p.87.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, p.232.

Thereafter, Brecht felt that ‘I cannot any longer... write in the old way’.³⁰⁵ For this reason, in the 1930s at least it was necessary ‘to represent the new humanity of the class-conscious proletariat of our era’ and not to attempt ‘to establish regulations for the construction of new, up-to-date novels’.³⁰⁶

There are particular historical reasons for Brecht’s resistance to the establishment of regulations regarding the novel during this era: above all, the Soviet-led objection to ‘formalism’. Brecht felt that, ‘If *formalism* means constantly seeking new forms for content that never changes, then retaining an old form for a new content is also a sign of formalism. Our critics must study the conditions of struggle, and develop their aesthetics from those conditions’.³⁰⁷ Certainly, then, he believed that a new society (and the struggle for the creation of that society) would require novel aesthetics and new modes in art. However, his subtlety of mind was such that he certainly did not assume that what is aesthetically new was necessarily always also politically radical. He insisted, for example, that paintings are not consistent with communist ideals when ‘Recognisable objects don’t occur in them any more’; ‘If we want to teach people that things should be seen differently, then we must teach this with reference to things.’³⁰⁸ A key question thus arises: ‘How, then, should we construct a technique?’³⁰⁹ ‘Certainly not by completely rejecting any technique we come across’, Brecht answers himself: ‘The old technique (which we encounter in stereotypical form) was once

³⁰⁵ Ibid, p.237.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, p.239.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, p.232, emphasis retained.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, pp.239-242.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, p.250.

capable of fulfilling certain societal functions; it is no longer capable... but the new functions are mixed with the old ones, and *we urgently need to study the outdated technique*'.³¹⁰

It is unmistakable, then, that for Brecht the new would not develop in pure contradistinction to the old; rather, traditional 'functions' should be studied and brought to bear upon new artistic techniques. We can also note that he had sympathy for the popular culture of his era, such as the crime novel: 'Anyone who exclaims "It's always the same", on ascertaining that a tenth of all murders take place in a vicarage... might as well exclaim "It's always the same!" in the theatre as soon as the curtain rises. *Originality is to be found elsewhere*.'³¹¹ This subtle decoupling of 'originality' from ostentatious novelty is very much in keeping with the critique of the politics of novelty I want to make in this book, and I will return to this general theme at several points in what follows. It is certainly interesting, and suggestive of a common misapprehension about modernism, that we can find such a gesture within the writings of a modernist of the stature of Brecht. We can also take illumination from his 1951 comments on the 'depraved, bourgeois culture' of 'so-called Existentialists' who have offered 'the old in a new guise'.³¹² On his view, these writers offered 'new artistic forms which presented nothing new other than formal innovation' with 'pessimism... recommended as a new pick-me-up'.³¹³ In such cases of novelty employed for its own sake, 'formal innovations were used everywhere to make the old appealing again, the threadbare pair of old trousers was turned inside out, which didn't make it any warmer, but it did look nicer (and

³¹⁰ Ibid, emphasis added.

³¹¹ Ibid, pp.263-4, emphasis added.

³¹² Ibid, p.314.

³¹³ Ibid.

warmer)'.³¹⁴ This, I would suggest, is comparable to Lennon's complaint as regards the sixties generation getting 'dressed up' but leaving the same authorities in control (see chapter two above).

Clearly, then, key modernists were at least dubious about the value of novelty for its own sake. The clarity of Brecht's thinking as regards this issue is impressively astute: 'A few new principles are found, they make a name for themselves, a new short cut seems to have been discovered'.³¹⁵ All well and good, so far, one might think. However, when 'people are just making themselves at home' in terms of these new principles, one must concede that 'The new trend in art did not correspond to a new trend in politics or in public affairs.' What is crucial, then, is that 'The new [aesthetic] form was a new order, of the sort that was experienced in National Socialism, a new, striking, agreeable arrangement of the old [social/political] scheme of things'.³¹⁶ Nevertheless, 'we can't return to the old, but must march on towards true innovations': where 'new classes have conquered the land and the means of production', as Brecht felt was occurring in France, England and China at the time, 'how are artists supposed to produce images of all that with the old artistic methods?'

We have explored the ideas of Brecht at length due to the subtlety of his thinking with regard to our core area of enquiry, namely the politics of novelty. As regards high modernism more narrowly, however, we should acknowledge that he is probably not the most typical practitioner. For one thing, Brecht was an uncompromising Marxist whereas, according to Stephen Bronner, modernists were 'mostly immune to the influence of Marx' and were 'essentially anarchists' who 'believed that the new would not come from within modernity,

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid, p.315.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

but [rather] would appear as an external event or force for which, culturally, the vanguard would act as a catalyst'.³¹⁷ For Bronner, in other words, the typical modernist assumed that avant-garde art would bring novelty from nowhere, rather than avant-gardism becoming necessary as a *response* to the revolutionary social change which Brecht, by contrast, assumed was imminent. It is well known that modernists such as Ezra Pound became ardent fascist sympathisers, meanwhile; a fact towards which Brecht seems to disapprovingly nod with his remark about National Socialism quoted in the last paragraph.

Bronner's understanding of the politics of modernism is worthy of some closer attention here. On his view modernism provided 'a new sensibility' within which 'institutional power was an afterthought. The subpolitical became the substitute for politics.'³¹⁸ Although one assumes that Bronner is on solid ground, here, elements of his argument are worth querying. If it is true, for example, that 'Modernism makes clear the mistake in attempting any mechanical identification of radical cultural tastes with radical political commitments' (an argument with which I agree), why does Bronner call for 'a new cultural radicalism – appropriate to a new age' in the last sentence in the book?³¹⁹ Is our age really so new anyway, relative to the twentieth century? Bronner demands a 'new and radical aesthetic precisely because criticism of the status quo... can take manifold forms and assume new meanings in new circumstances'.³²⁰ What, though, if our *material* circumstances are not really so different from those which faced the modernists at the barricades? Isn't the exploitation of labour still going on today, after all? Is it not the case that the proletariat still has little or nothing to lose

³¹⁷ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia* (New York: Columbia, 2012), pp.3-4.

³¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.6.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.161.

³²⁰ *Ibid*, p.31.

but its chains? Perhaps not, of course; some will argue that, in the West at least, we no longer have a property-less working class. It would be hard to deny, however, that the means of production, distribution and exchange remain in the hands of a wealthy minority whilst a mass of workers labour unhappily to gain access to the basic necessities of life (food, shelter, clothing and so forth) not only in the West but across the globe. The material basis of 'our age', in that sense, is not so different from that which has been in place for two centuries and more, it can be argued. This at least raises a question as to how valuable a 'new and radical aesthetic' is likely to be at the present time given that such aesthetics yielded limited results for the left in the twentieth century.

Brecht's assessment of the tensions between novelty and tradition at the outset of the late modernist period is more astute, I would suggest: 'In these days the conception of the New is itself falsified', he suggests. 'The Old and the Very Old, now re-entering the arena, proclaim themselves as New; or else it is held to be new when the Old or the Very Old are put over in a new way' and yet 'the really New, having been deposed today, is declared old-fashioned, degraded to being a transitory phase whose day is done.'³²¹ I have already argued in chapter two that the earlier sixties (which arguably begins in the mid-to-late 1950s) marks a critical shift away from the traditional left (hence the talk, in that time, of a 'New Left', obviously) which is only extended and hardened in the later sixties and beyond. I would suggest that such is very much the tendency which these comments from Brecht are nodding towards. I will argue, furthermore, that a critical component of the shift in question begins with the development of late modernism from the 1950s onwards. It is this era, and its relationship to popular music, to which I turn my attention in the next section.

³²¹ Bertolt Brecht, *The Life of Galileo* (London: Methuen, 1963), p.6.

The Tradition of the New

Whilst there may not be a gulf between the overall aspirations of the high modernist period relative to the late modernist era, there is certainly something of a gap. In part this gap arises simply from the fact that the challenge to tradition – whether or not it was the *raison d'être* of modernism or simply one element within a complex relationship with ‘the old’ (based on the data offered in the last section, I am inclined towards the latter interpretation) – had already been made decades earlier. Late modernism, therefore, with good reason can be claimed as a starting point for postmodernism, to some extent at least. For the first time, those who wanted to rip up the rulebook and push artistic boundaries as far out as they could imagine them going were faced with a realisation that such was precisely what the previous generation had already been attempting for several decades.

A somewhat prescient observer of this dilemma is Irving Howe, whose 1971 tract *Decline of the New* used the term postmodernism to describe the issue at hand several years before other theorists began to apply it to the situation which modernism passed on to subsequent generations. For Howe, ‘Modernism, by its very nature, is uncompromisingly a minority culture, creating and defining itself through opposition to a dominant culture’; by the sixties, however, ‘nothing of the sort is true. Floodlights glaring and tills overflowing, the new sensibility is a success from the very start.’³²² Howe has the likes of Andy Warhol, the Beat Poets and, on the theoretical side, Herbert Marcuse in his sights. We noted, in chapter two, the latter’s use of the term ‘new sensibility’; for Howe, these two words connote a disreputable state of affairs which has arisen in the sixties: ‘By now the search for the “new”, often reduced to a trivialising of form and matter, has become the predictable old.’³²³

³²² Irving Howe, *Decline of the New* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971), p.258.

³²³ *Ibid*, p.259.

Extending the prescience of his analysis, Howe even foreshadows the conception of ‘parody’ which, many years later, will become so important for postmodern theorists: ‘much current writing is indeed a continuity with modernism, but a continuity of grotesque and parody’.³²⁴ The new sensibility of the sixties might have had at least some agents within its coterie for whom the long term aspirations of the left remained central (as was certainly the case for Howe himself); these agents were left with little option beyond ‘swinging along with a grin of resignation’, however.³²⁵

Howe’s critique is often hilarious; for example, his complaint that ‘Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers, This Is a Stickup’ is ‘a slogan that does not strike one as a notable improvement over “Workers of the World, Unite”’.³²⁶ His prime purpose is serious, though: if ‘the spokesmen for the new sensibility proclaim [their agency] to be still another turn in the endless gyrations of modernism, still another revolt in the permanent revolution of twentieth-century sensibility’, are we therefore trapped in a cycle where ‘revolution’ cannot move beyond sensibility and into actual social change?³²⁷ Clearly Howe’s concerns reflect many of my own regarding the markedly post-Marxist politics of the sixties and beyond. It is the particular question of modernism endlessly repeating itself which concerns us here, above all, however: ‘Modernism will not come to an end; its war chants will be repeated throughout the decades’, Howe insists; ‘what awaits it is publicity and sensation, the kind of savage parody which may indeed be the only fate worse than death’.³²⁸

³²⁴ Ibid, p.260.

³²⁵ Ibid, p.261.

³²⁶ Ibid, p.257.

³²⁷ Ibid, pp.257-8.

³²⁸ Ibid, p.33.

As noted, the trajectory of this argument has an impressive level of prescience. It is also slightly unfair, however, for the precise reason that no previous generation – Howe’s included – had managed to displace capitalism. That given, the late modernists could be allowed a more sympathetic hearing. ‘The modernist sensibility posits a blockage, if not an end, of history: an apocalyptic cul-de-sac in which both teleological ends and secular progress are called into question, perhaps become obsolete’, Howe argues.³²⁹ That being the case, is late modernism not merely *as guilty as* high modernism *vis a vis* the failure to ignite actual social revolution and the demise of capitalism? To the extent that late modernism was the first instance of this particular historical error repeating itself, I would suggest that we can see it above all as a tragedy. It is the implied demand for a return to modernist sensibilities of the later twentieth century, where some have returned dogmatically to an assumption that radical aesthetics is a necessary correlate of radical politics, which strikes me as more of a farce. For example, Bronner as discussed above, to some extent, or Badiou and others of his ilk, more strongly, as we will see in the next chapter.

On my view, then, late modernism is not quite a postmodernism *avant la lettre*: the seeds of the crisis are in the air, certainly, but the uselessness of an endlessly repeating modernist aesthetic is not as overwhelmingly obvious as it would become in later decades. I am, therefore, in broad sympathy with Charles Jencks (who Steven Connor credits with ‘the invention of the category “Late Modern”’) when he suggests that late modernism took ‘the stylistic ideas and values of modernism to an exaggerated extreme in order to squeeze out a terminal spurt of novelty from them’.³³⁰ On Jencks’s view, ‘To call a Late Modernist a Post-

³²⁹ Ibid, pp.5-6.

³³⁰ Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.84.

Modernist is tantamount to calling a Protestant a Catholic because they both practice a Christian religion.³³¹ Broadly speaking, this seems correct to me: late modernists were arguably the first generation to be faced with an artistic field where to employ radically novel methods was to reproduce a significant element of the previous generation's methodology. One can sympathise to some extent, therefore, with the predicament which the artists of the late fifties and the sixties were faced: what does one do when radical aesthetic novelty seems to have been established as the norm? This problem became central for postmodernist thinkers, as we will see in the next section of the present chapter; for the late modernists, by contrast, the issue was only beginning to emerge as a problem.

This is not to say that there is nothing to critique, in retrospect, about the late modernist response to the problem, however. Clearly Rosenberg's assumption in *The Tradition of the New* that it will be possible to 'distinguish between a real novelty and a fake one', for example, looks highly dubious in the contemporary academic context where such notions of 'authenticity' are less easily accepted.³³² We should acknowledge, though, that Rosenberg and his ilk did not offer an uncritical acceptance of the late modernist 'desire to capture a bitch goddess whose first name is Novelty'.³³³ Even the hard-to-please Irving Howe acknowledges that such theorists ('the New York writers', as he calls them) had redeeming features: 'Much that happened during these [post-War] years is to be deplored and dismissed but not all was waste'.³³⁴ It is a little unfair, then, for Michael North to omit the first word from the following sentence (of Rosenberg's) and then to stop at the word 'NEW': 'Since the

³³¹ Quoted in *ibid*, p.85.

³³² Rosenberg, *The Tradition*, p.3.

³³³ Howe, *Decline*, p.228.

³³⁴ *Ibid*, p.237.

only thing that counts for Modern Art is that it shall be NEW, and since the question of its newness is determined not by analysis but by social power and pedagogy, the vanguard painter functions in a milieu utterly indifferent to the content of his work.’ Clearly, here, Rosenberg is in fact more sensitive to the kind of questions which concern us today than North makes him appear.

Indeed, *The Tradition of the New* highlights many errors of thinking which seem, of late, to have escaped the notice of theorists as regards the fraught relationship between aesthetics and politics. To argue, for example, that ‘The best conclusion would seem to be that modern art is revolutionary but that the revolution of art is not that of political radicalism’ is very much to oppose the currently fashionable ideas of Badiou, as we will see in chapter five.³³⁵ This disambiguation is valuable for our purposes. However, I would suggest that to ask ‘how can the radical artist be satisfied with the terminology of yesterday’s revolts?’ is not quite synonymous with the argumentation from Brecht quoted above.³³⁶ The difference, I contend, lies in the *impetus* for the change of ‘terminology’: for Brecht, revolutionary change determines the need for new artistic forms and terms (see above); Rosenberg, by contrast, seems to fall back on the idea that this ‘radical artist’ will need to place the radical (c)art before the revolutionary horse, as it were. Take ‘Property is theft!’, for example; does this nineteenth century slogan not retain a certain power regardless of the date on the calendar? If ‘everyone is aware that revolution in art and revolution in politics are not the same thing and may even be in opposition to each other’ (regrettably, I am not convinced that everyone *is* aware of this fact, then or now, though), surely the demand for a radical and politicised art

³³⁵ Rosenberg, *The Tradition*, p.75.

³³⁶ *Ibid*, p.81.

might learn a good deal from the old terminology?³³⁷ In any case, the most important thing we need is a new society, surely, rather than a new terminology.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, Rosenberg's critique of the heroic painters of the late modernist period is admirable, if nothing else, for its barely-veiled mockery of the heroic novelty displayed by the male artists associated with this period. One can hardly miss the implication, for example, of his description of the vanguard artist ('The man may be over forty') who 'gesticulated upon the canvas and watched for what each *novelty* would declare him and his art to be.'³³⁸ In case we missed the point, Rosenberg lays it on thicker: 'When a tube of paint is squeezed by the Absolute, the result can only be a Success. The painter need keep himself on hand solely to collect the benefits of an endless series of strokes of luck.' This 'gesture completes itself without arousing either an opposing movement within itself nor the desire in the artist to make the act more fully his own', we learn.³³⁹ Tubes, hands, endless stroking arousing desires, the act of squeezing resulting in the painter's fluid spurting upon the canvas: is it not clear that Rosenberg is telling us that the 'novelty' which the late modernist artist has proven himself to be is a middle-aged wanker (as the English will say)?

Late modernism, then, was strongly critiqued by the more critical critics (Rosenberg, Howe, Greenberg) for its emphasis upon novelty.³⁴⁰ If North is to be believed, meanwhile (and many of the quotations I have offered in the last section support his point), pre-war modernism had

³³⁷ Ibid, p.77.

³³⁸ Ibid, p.29 and p.31m emphasis added to the latter.

³³⁹ Ibid, p.31.

³⁴⁰ For reasons of space, we have paid scant attention to the influential ideas of Clement Greenberg. In brief, though, we can note that, although he was a selective advocate of the new in art, he was always critical of what he perceived as 'mere novelty', North, *A History*, pp.174-5.

in fact been less ardently in favour of the shock of the new than the late modernists perceived it to be – hence the growing assumption, from around 1950, that Pound’s ‘make it new’ had been some form of rallying cry for radical novelty (which, in fact, it had not). How does all this relate to popular music?

As we saw in the last section, the high modernists were not necessarily opposed to popular music; some, indeed, appear to have shown a degree of interest in it. By the late modernist period – the fifties and sixties, that is – the relationship had changed somewhat. Think, for example, of the Beatles’ famous friendship with Astrid Kircherr in Hamburg in 1960.

Kircherr – who is said to have given the Beatles their distinctive hairstyles – can be broadly characterised as having a modernistic outlook; at least she ‘used to spend most of my time in chic, “existentialist” bars’ and had little or no interest in rock’n’roll, preferring ‘French chansons, jazz and classical recordings’.³⁴¹ It is not so contentious to suggest that the Beatles would become the pivotal catalyst, later in the sixties, for the elevation of rock’n’roll-influenced popular music to a perceived art form (only Dylan could seriously rival them for broad cultural influence during that period, I would argue). In the fifties, however, it is fair to propose that jazz was about as close as most modernism-influenced art students (such as Kircherr) would get to popular music.

Is jazz a sub-category of popular music, pure and simple? I would suggest that there is a bit more to it than this and, furthermore, that it is precisely the ‘arty’ status which jazz had begun to develop by the late fifties which can interest us in the present context. Some strands of jazz, at this time, fit fairly comfortably within the late modernist palette, but a ‘racial’ dimension does complicate the picture somewhat. Dick Hebdige, for example, argues that ‘by the mid-50s a new, younger white audience began to see itself reflected darkly in the

³⁴¹ Barry Miles, *Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1997), pp.63-4.

dangerous, uneven surfaces of contemporary *avant-garde* jazz; this, he suggests, occurred despite musicians who ‘deliberately sought to restrict white identification by producing a jazz which was difficult to listen to and even more difficult to imitate’.³⁴² I am not entirely convinced Hebdige is on the ball here, in regards to the motivation of the African American jazz avant-garde (was Coltrane, for example, really only motivated by a desire to outwit the whites?). In any case, though, his comments do seem to confirm that the experimentalism which certain influential jazz practitioners developed from the late 1950s onwards was in keeping with the broad trajectory of late modernism – an attempt to go ‘further out’, that is, despite the fact that avant-garde experimentation was by then something of a tradition within the arts. A glance at the sleeve of Dave Brubeck’s *Time Out* album suggests that a connection between experimental art and jazz music was being encouraged in the late 1950s by the industry, who were keen to market jazz to the (overwhelmingly white, we should note) college fraternity. New York’s Museum of Modern Art’s decision to accompany their 1999 Pollock retrospective with a CD of ‘hot jazz tunes hand-picked from Jackson Pollock’s own record collection’, meanwhile, suggests that the association between jazz and late modernist art has become fairly entrenched in the public mind.³⁴³

Does this arty status preclude jazz from being counted as popular music? Not, from a twenty first century vantage point: after the Beatles and so forth, most are willing to count pop as some kind of art form, so if jazz was becoming an ‘art’ then that does not necessarily preclude it from also being ‘pop’. Jazz was not accepted in the academy at that time, of course, but it is fair to say that at least some jazz, at this time, was coming to be taken

³⁴² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), p.47.

³⁴³ Various Artists, *Jackson Pollock Jazz*, (Museum Music), 1999. We can also note that Ornette Coleman’s genre-inspiring album *Free Jazz* features a Jackson Pollock painting on its front cover.

seriously in certain quarters (note, for example, that Kircherr literally places it between French chansons and ‘classical recordings’ in the quotation above). Late modernism’s ‘pop art’ movement contributed to the growing status of some popular music, presumably. We can at least assert that the couplet in question was unthinkable during the high modernist period: popular and art were antithetical, at that time. By mid-century, this was less the case and jazz, prior to the arrival of the Beatles, Dylan and all that, was at the frontline of this development, I would contend.

Is this shift significant, though? It certainly nudges us toward a certain (arguably postmodern) relativism in which, as any arts undergraduate can confirm, the boundaries between high and low culture have become decidedly blurred. How truly modernistic was jazz in the fifties and sixties, though? Is there something in this music which fits neatly with the search for a radical novelty beyond all traditional structures? Some have argued as much, certainly. Consider, for example, Roger T. Dean’s argument for a ‘clear analogy’ between the action painting of late modernists such as Jackson Pollock and the ‘action playing’ of a free jazz musician such as pianist Cecil Taylor.³⁴⁴ On Dean’s view, Taylor makes the link by ‘using clusters instead of drips’ and treating ‘the keyboard of the piano as a one-dimensional pitch map played as a single rapidly moving line’.³⁴⁵ Whether or not we are persuaded by this somewhat tenuous metaphor, it is surely telling, with regard to the question of jazz moving in into a mode akin to the novelty of late modernism, that Dean claims such creativity as ‘largely non-formulaic, non-referent-based’.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Roger T. Dean, *New Structures in Jazz and Improvised Music Since 1960* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), pp.179-80.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.180.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Such, I would argue, has been the dream of at least some proponents of free jazz and improvised music during the last fifty years: no formulas, no reference to anything concrete or recognisable, pure freedom. We can note, for example, Derek Bailey's remark that 'there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation which is opposed to the aims [of writing about improvisation] and [which] contradicts the idea of documentation'.³⁴⁷ Similarly we can observe with interest free jazz exponent Bill Dixon's claim that 'my music *wasn't* for everyone, and neither was Schoenberg's music for everyone', nor Webern's and Bartók's, he insists; 'if too many people are digging what you do, you'd better look at it again because it may not be what you think it is.'³⁴⁸ The trouble, however, is that the rejection of formulæ, if it happens more than once, is necessarily a new formula of a certain stripe. The nominal freedom which free jazz implies it could give us is therefore rather nebulous: if music can give a sense of freedom, it would nevertheless take a rather hidebound musician to insist that the *frisson* of a free-sense could only be enabled with the nuisance of a new-sense, I would suggest. Surely there is more to freedom than re-writing the rules of music on every beat of the bar? Such a constant re-writing is hard to imagine in any case; especially when undermining the very influence of beat and even 'pulse' has been an explicit ambition of some later modes of freely improvised music, according to Dean.³⁴⁹ My complaint, in short, is that even if a music without pulse, without pitch and entirely without structure could be created, and even if I thoroughly enjoyed listening to it (which is perfectly feasible, for I love avant-garde music as much as the next university lecturer), my enjoyment of that music late on a Sunday night will necessarily be diminished by the need to prepare for an early start for

³⁴⁷ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Boston: Da Capo, 1992), p.ix.

³⁴⁸ Iain Anderson, *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p.86, emphasis retained.

³⁴⁹ Dean, *New Structures*, p.188.

work on a Monday morning. (In other words, the need to sell my labour time in order to survive means that any sense of freedom I might gain from free jazz will be significantly limited by a restricted freedom entailed by the capitalist work system.)

Paul Hegarty has written interestingly of such issues in his *Noise/Music: A History*: ‘the collective inspiration of free improvisation’, he acknowledges, is an ‘easy statement of “community” [which] represents an ideological distortion of the economically stratified world of capitalism’.³⁵⁰ Despite this rather large obstacle to it being describable as truly ‘free’, Hegarty tries to hold some faith that ‘Improvisation is socialist and collective’ and ‘Marxist in its practice and effect’.³⁵¹ He admits that the spontaneous ideal of free improvisation should be critiqued by a Marxist: ‘I am sure this [critique] is right, but as with much of Marxism, if applied fully, most experimental art would be dismissed’, he adds.³⁵² The thought of such dismissal is too much for Hegarty to bear. Those of us who also love this music will sympathise. However, the Marxist critique does not necessarily disprove that ‘free music’ is good music; our question, moreover, is whether the word ‘free’ is well suited here. In any case, the music in question is obviously pertinent to any discussion of the relationship between the politics of novelty and its relationship with music.

Is such music really *popular* music, though? Perhaps not: European improvisers such as Derek Bailey fall closer to an ‘art music’ category than a popular one, arguably, whilst Bill Dixon is clearly comparing his jazz with the ‘high art’ of twentieth century composition (see above). According to Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins ‘avant-garde jazz is... an educated

³⁵⁰ Hegarty, Paul, *Noise/Music: A History* (London: Continuum, 2007), p.51.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p.52.

taste for a small, eager audience'.³⁵³ That said, though, who knows what might be popular if, say, the left's dream of revolutionary change in society and an abolition of capitalism were to come to fruition? Marx and the Marxists always tend to be reluctant to spell out what such a world might look like: only in that glorious time, the argument goes, could the nature and character of the new society become clear. Perhaps, then, avant-garde jazz and freely improvised music is precisely what we can guess would be popular after the revolution: the question is necessarily aporetic, at least from a Marxist point of view.

Having said this, Georg Lukács' *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* casts some useful light upon the specific question as to what a post-revolutionary socialist society might look like.³⁵⁴ Lukács' is a particularly valuable text, for our purposes, due to its markedly critical perspective on modernism and, in particular, late modernism. Particular pertinent, for our purposes, is Lukács' historical context when writing this tract (1957) wherein the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956) had thrown the on-going status of Marxism into something of a crisis and, still more importantly for us, the differences between late modernism relative to high modernism were beginning to emerge more clearly. On Lukács' view, 'The experience of Nothingness, though distorting reality when made use of in literature, did possess a certain subjective authenticity' at a certain point in the past; 'This authenticity, however, has diminished with time. Thus, as the crisis of modernism deepens, critical realism grows in importance.'³⁵⁵

The 'crisis of modernism' to which Lukács refers is the rise of the late modernist tendency, essentially. According to North (and, again, the quotations I have offered above support his

³⁵³ Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins, *Jazz* (New York: Norton, 2009), p.437.

³⁵⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Redwood, 1963).

³⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.81.

argument), late modernism mistakes the apparent novelty within high modernist art, literature and music for an absolute rejection of all tradition. When this happens, ‘modernism means not the enrichment, but the negation of art’, Lukács suggests.³⁵⁶ Against modernism he counterpoises ‘realism’ which, he argues, ‘is not one style among others’ but, rather, ‘is the basis of all literature; all styles (even those seemingly most opposed to realism) originate in it or are significantly related to it’.³⁵⁷ Because ‘Formal novelty, and an affected originality, often conceal a subjectivist dogmatism’, it is best avoided by the left.³⁵⁸ It matters not that the creativity of the right also uses essentially realist techniques because ‘similarity of technique does not imply similarity of ideology; nor is the approval or rejection of certain techniques a pointer to a writer’s basic aim’.³⁵⁹ In the end ‘abstract art’ brings ‘a rejection of socialism’ whereas a ‘realistic writer must seek the nodal points of [the tensions and contradictions between the individual and his relation with his/her fellow human beings], determine where they are at their most intense and most typical, and give suitable expression to them’.³⁶⁰

It is this rejection of socialism which most worries Lukács: ‘The main thing – and it is no small thing – is whether the writer’s view is able to include – or, better, demands – a dynamic, complex, analytical rendering of social relationships, or whether it leads to a loss of perspective and historicity’.³⁶¹ Lukács associates the latter with modernism but he also argues that a modernist such as Brecht, whose later plays ‘evidence a partial return to despised [by modernists] Aristotlean aesthetics’, is in fact something of a closet realist: ‘Where Brecht’s

³⁵⁶ Ibid, p.46.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, p.48.

³⁵⁸ Ibid, p.50.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, p.53.

³⁶⁰ Ibid, p.65, p.75.

³⁶¹ Ibid, p.82.

characters had once been spokesmen for political points of view’, Lukács argues that the characters in his later plays are ‘multi-dimensional. They are living human beings, wrestling with conscience and the world around them.’³⁶² Modernism may be appealing on certain levels; however, ‘the dilemma of the choice between an aesthetically appealing, but decadent modernism, and a fruitful critical realism’ is no choice at all for Lukács: whatever is most fruitful for socialism must win out.³⁶³

The drift of this argument is important not only for our comparison of high modernism and late modernism but is also pertinent to the discussion of popular music’s potential contribution to a revolutionary future in the twenty first century, to be discussed in chapter six below. His emphatic argument that adherence to tradition can allow great originality – ‘The stronger a writer’s ties with the cultural heritage of his nation, the more original his work will be, even where he is in opposition to his own society and calls in a foreign tradition to redress the balance’ – is one which could have radical implications for the political-aesthetic question as regards popular music in the future.³⁶⁴

What is particular striking about Lukács’ thinking, on my view, is his assumption that the nature of post-revolutionary art and culture is worthy of our consideration, even daring to ask ‘what of the relation between critical and socialist realism in the period *after* the seizure of power by the proletariat?’³⁶⁵ ‘We must bear in mind that, however violent the political break, people (including writers) will not be automatically transformed’, he concludes.³⁶⁶ People

³⁶² Ibid, p.88.

³⁶³ Ibid, p.92.

³⁶⁴ Ibid, p.103.

³⁶⁵ Ibid, p.104, emphasis retained.

³⁶⁶ Ibid, pp.104-5.

almost never write like this anymore, of course; even those who count themselves as women and men of the left. Who dares offer conjecture about an imminent and ‘violent’ social revolution, today? Žižek, perhaps; but we will have reason to query the efficacy of his Badiouian commitment to a politics of novelty in chapter five below. Lukács’ thinking is of a very different tenor: ‘We must not forget that remnants of the old order, and of the old consciousness, linger on and continue to inform many people’s experience. But they do not survive... in their old form.’³⁶⁷ The gesture is crucial, for our purposes: ‘A change of direction transforms not only the content and form of the phenomenon, it gives qualitatively new functions to that part of it which remains unchanged’; in other words, come the revolution *even that which is ‘old’ will function as new.*³⁶⁸ Such is the case because, ‘though understanding the past in terms of the new socialist reality may represent, qualitatively speaking, an advance, no total break with traditional perspectives is required’ for this novelty to become possible.³⁶⁹

We have focused upon free jazz in this section largely because, in the words of jazz scholar Iain Anderson, such music is perceived to have ‘converged with the practices of cubists [and] abstract expressionists’ during the late modernist period under discussion.³⁷⁰ To a significant extent, this was jazz’s modernist moment – but as with the art of Warhol, Pollock and so on, it fell rather late compared with the high modernist period which, by mid-century, was perceived to have passed. There are certainly other ways of mapping the evolution from high modernist to late modernist to postmodernist periods on to the history of popular music,

³⁶⁷ Ibid, p.107.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p.109.

³⁷⁰ Anderson, *This is our Music*, p.114.

however. E. Ann Kaplan, for example, has argued in relation to pop videos (but the implication of a fit with post-war pop history is implied moreover, I feel) that a 'romantic' (in a high art sense) period is discernible from the 'commercialized soft rock of the 1960s'.³⁷¹ Meanwhile a 'modernist' era can be discerned from the 'socially conscious', 'oppositional stances' of the 1960s and 1970s artists. In the end a 'postmodernist era of rock music' can be recognised in the 1980s.

I feel that such a mapping of the evolution of high art to the post-war popular field is highly problematic. As someone who came of age in the 1980s and 90s listening to socially conscious and oppositional music from, say, Billy Bragg, the Smiths and Bikini Kill (to name just three examples), I am uncomfortable with the idea that these characteristics are best associated with the 1960s and 1970s. Certainly the 1980s were different from the 1960s in important and clear ways; but I am not convinced that one can be labelled emphatically as modernist and oppositional whilst the other is essentially postmodernist and ironic. Overall, I am inclined to agree with North that the assumption that the aesthetic novelty of sixties rock leads inexorably to political radicalism and revolution (the oppositional stance to which Kaplan refers as she paints sixties rock as a correlate of high modernism) is a sham. 'This purely metaphorical and aesthetic version of revolution had nothing to do with the actual politics of the 1960s', North argues.³⁷² Even more intriguing within North's argument, for our purposes at least, is his suggestion that 'once revolution had been defined as... a permanent state, then resistance to it could actually look progressive'.³⁷³ Can such 'resistance' be configured as an effect of the 'postmodern condition'? Can, in other words, postmodernism

³⁷¹ Connor, *Postmodernist*, p.184 for this and all remaining descriptions of Kaplan's argument in this paragraph.

³⁷² North, *Novelty*, p.200.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, p.201.

be regarded as a progressive and radical response to the errors of modernism? It is to these questions I now turn.

The Failure of the New

Although postmodernism was all the rage with academics and cultural commentators for a fairly lengthy period of time, some write today as if the postmodern moment has passed. We can note, for example, that Michael North's *Novelty* uses the word only once and then only to suggest that the artistic outputs associated with the term have failed to endure: 'modernism, as a movement and as a collection of works, has turned out to be more durable than the postmodernism that was supposed to replace it', he argues.³⁷⁴ North's statement is problematic on a few levels. For one thing, is postmodernism really supposed to have 'replaced' modernism? In fact, as we will see, many have treated it as a *continuation* of modernism. Also, isn't postmodern art not really *supposed* to have a 'durable' influence? If Warhol's idea that everyone could or should be famous for fifteen minutes was an early pointer towards postmodernism's break down of the 'grand narratives', after all, then surely the artwork's failure to endure would mean that it *has* done something different from modernism?

The idea of a postmodernism certainly gripped the attention of a large number of scholars for a lengthy period of time from the 1970s onwards. Highly significant amongst these thinkers, without doubt, is Frederic Jameson. On his view, we have arrived 'in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible'.³⁷⁵ Consequent to this, 'all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary

³⁷⁴ Ibid, p.205.

³⁷⁵ Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in Kaplan, E. Ann, *Postmodernism and Its Discontents* (London: Verso, 1988), p.18 for this and all subsequent quotations in the present paragraph.

museum'. Does this mean that there can be nothing new at all? Not quite: 'contemporary or postmodern art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way'. Furthermore, 'one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past'.

In a way, then, postmodernism (at least in Jameson's eyes) *is* offering something new: what is new about postmodern art is its recognition of the failure of the new, we can summarise. Put like this, the postmodern critique could have great utility for the argument I want to make in the present book: in order to feel new, art does not have to actually be identifiably new in some absolute way; more important, I would argue, is the feeling itself (and the political agency which, perhaps, it can inspire). The problem with Jameson's way of thinking in particular and the general tendency of much postmodernist theory more generally, however, is that a mourning for the (perceived) heroic novelty of the modernist brings great pessimism into the postmodernist's world view. Note, for example, that on Jameson's view 'the older models – Picasso, Proust, T.S. Eliot – do not work anymore' because 'nobody has that kind of unique private world and style to express any longer'.³⁷⁶ The assumption, here, is that high modernism's formal innovations allowed the 'unique private' inner-world to be expressible whereas, once these innovations have been presented to the world, such expressivity has now become impossible. The philosophical problem with this is very easy to formulate: if unique and genuinely private, how could the 'world' in question be presented? If novelty/innovation was the condition which made this presentation possible, surely the recognisability of the newness means that what is being presented is not unique nor private/internal: if recognisable, what is being presented must be social, generalizable and place-able within a context which we can refer to as 'the old'.

³⁷⁶ Ibid, pp.17-8.

In a sense, then, a crucial question is whether the failure of the new, to use Jameson's phrase, implies that modernism was always already a failed project or, alternatively, whether modernism was a great thing but, sadly, we can no longer exploit its resources. Is postmodernism supposed to be a replacement of modernism or an extension from it? As regards that question, the jury, it is fair to say, is out. One can find comments from Jameson explicitly counterpoising postmodernism against the 'modernism it seeks to displace'.³⁷⁷ For others, however, 'It's not the world that is [or has become] postmodern'; rather, 'it is the perspective from which that world is seen that is postmodern'.³⁷⁸ For this reason, Ihab Hassan could even go as far as to argue that 'The postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism' – we can retroactively observe postmodern elements, that is, within the body of modernist works from the past.³⁷⁹ David Harvey is on much the same page, according to Hans Bertens: 'postmodernism is best seen as a particular kind of crisis *within* modernism', not a break from it.³⁸⁰ For Jencks, meanwhile, postmodernism is a 'radical traditionalism', according to Bertens.³⁸¹ Jencks railed against Lyotard's understanding of postmodernism because, on Jencks' view, postmodernism is certainly not equivalent to 'continual innovation': Lyotard's mistake, he complained, is to have confused late modernism with postmodernism.³⁸²

³⁷⁷ Ibid, p.14.

³⁷⁸ Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.9.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, p.40.

³⁸⁰ Ibid, p.222.

³⁸¹ Ibid, p.58.

³⁸² Ibid, p.60.

One could easily go on. Almost any text on postmodernism will acknowledge near the outset that, as Bertens puts it in his opening sentence, ‘Postmodernism is an exasperating term’.³⁸³ A large part of the exasperation arises from the contradictory usages of the term. Robert Stern, to pick an example almost at random, counterpoises ‘traditional post-modernism’ against deconstruction-influenced ‘schismatic post-modernism’; other theorists, however, tell us that postmodernism has gone beyond such binaries, replacing modernism’s ‘either/or’ with a ‘both/and’.³⁸⁴ For some, postmodernism is practically synonymous with post-structuralism although, in truth, the latter is only really added to discourse on postmodernism at a relatively late stage and is distinct from it in definite ways.³⁸⁵

What is more to the point, for our purposes, is the question of postmodernism and popular music. Does rock and pop change between, say, the sixties and the eighties such that, by the arrival of the latter decade, one is entitled to declare that ‘the whole field of contemporary rock music is in itself postmodern’?³⁸⁶ If so, can we add that pop and rock, throughout the period since the eighties, has remained in this changed and postmodern state? Alternatively, could it be that, since modernism was essentially elitist, the popular, by dint of both name and practical fact, is always already postmodern thanks to its populism? After all, if ‘The

³⁸³ Ibid, p.3.

³⁸⁴ Ibid, p.63 and p.89. Other binaries offered up within the text include that between a ‘mainstream’ postmodernism and one which ‘destabilizes the real’, p.217, and Harvey’s distinction between a politically progressive and a reactionary postmodernism, p.222.

³⁸⁵ Ibid, p.35. Callinicos is emphatic, and rightly so on my view, that postmodernism and post-structuralism should not be conflated, Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.5.

³⁸⁶ Connor, *Postmodernist*, p.184.

popular... devalues concepts of uniqueness, of authorial genius, of formal purity, and so on', doesn't popular music have to be postmodern?³⁸⁷

The rub, here, is that a mass of literature (including some scholarly work) certainly will cling to concepts such as uniqueness, genius and so on in relation to popular music.³⁸⁸ Kaplan's implication that post-war pop replicates the high art drift from romanticism to modernism to postmodernism (see above), furthermore, is far from uncommon in discourses on popular music. Indeed, I would suggest that the belief that post-war popular music reached a peak of innovation in the sixties and has been increasingly in a rut in the ensuing fifty years has been a received wisdom for many years. What, then, is the pop musician to do in the face of this problem?

If a significant problem is that 'it's all been done before' – which, for Jameson at least, *is* perceived to be a pivotal problem within the postmodern era, as we have seen – then the decision becomes less about what to repeat and more about how the repetition should be handled. For popular music practitioners, at least, such is a core creative question: for musical repetition can provide great joy, as Richard Middleton has pointed out; 'ecstasy-through-repetition... gets you high'.³⁸⁹ Issues around repetition and standardisation are always confronting the maker of popular music. In popular music, indeed, the decision is sometimes (often, I would argue) less a matter of how to minimise repetition than a question as to how best to maximise the delirious impact of repeating a simple idea. From Scott Joplin's or Jelly

³⁸⁷ Bertens, *The Idea*, p.100.

³⁸⁸ Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, for example, have effectively encouraged us to think it fair to call Bob Dylan a genius, as noted in Dale, *Anyone*, p.11n.

³⁸⁹ Middleton, Richard, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp.164-5.

Roll Morton's insistently re-delivered licks through to the maddening-to-most (but loved by a certain class of listener) eternal return found within the urban music known as 'happy hardcore', popular music has repeatedly shown that repeating the same and/or similar material over and over can have a great appeal.

Two kinds of repetition are at stake in popular music, of course: intra-musical repetition of riffs, on the one hand, and inter-musical standardisation of form within (and across) genres, on the other hand. The great theoriser of the latter type (standardisation, that is) is Adorno. On Richard Middleton's view, 'Adorno has many strengths': for example, his well-known realisation that 'popular' and 'serious' musics are 'torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up'.³⁹⁰ Of course, though, Middleton realises that Adorno's hostility to popular music is problematic; and it is interesting, for our purposes, that the former scholar challenges the latter precisely because popular music's 'collectivizing repetitions can take on a positive cultural significance, in the context of use by young working-class dancers'.³⁹¹ For Middleton, therefore, popular music 'actually provides a striking model for ways in which repetition techniques *can* overreach the needs of capitalist practice'. Because 'the historically-specific Adornian notion of repetition as a function of social control' is somewhat insufficient, 'a certain relaxation of the analytical strangle-hold' is required in order to move beyond the idea that pop's common use of repetition is some transparent 'manifestation of "Fordism"'.³⁹²

Adorno's immense influence remains in place upon those rare reaches of the field which are still groping around for a Marxist musicology. This much is clear from an international

³⁹⁰ Ibid, p.34.

³⁹¹ Ibid, p.55.

³⁹² Ibid, p.291.

conference on *Music, Marxism and the Frankfurt School* held at University College Dublin in July 2014: the conference's Call for Papers made it clear that the selection panel 'particularly welcomes papers on members of the Frankfurt School *besides Adorno*'. In fact, however, all but two of the thirteen conference sessions included at least one paper which named Adorno in the title; indeed, six of the thirteen sessions (roughly half, then) named Adorno within the title of *all* papers within that session. This tells us a great deal about the extent to which Adorno continues to cast his shadow across attempts to combine Marxism with the study of music.

The problem with this on-going influence is that, if Middleton is to be believed, the dichotomy between an acquiescent repetition, on the one hand, and a more politically palatable avant-gardism, on the other hand, is not an adequate model for proper consideration of certain social and political capabilities which popular music's use of repetition retains in practice. Given its evident comfortableness with repetition, indeed, perhaps popular music has been postmodern right from the beginning (particularly, indeed, given that – as we saw in chapter one – popular music doesn't really have a clearly identifiable beginning point; lack of clear origins being generally perceived as a characteristic of postmodernism). It all sounds the same, this music hall and ragtime and jazz and rock'n'roll and so forth? Readers who take pleasure in any one of (or, indeed, all three of) the aforementioned generic areas will be disinclined to agree with such a claim. In any case, to affirm that a felt-sameness is acceptable in most popular music economies of taste *doesn't* necessarily mean that popular music is politically worthless: it just means that this music isn't necessarily expected to display an aesthetic representation of development and originality. Rather, as Middleton shows, popular music can often be associated – up to a point, at least – with the Freudian

‘Death drive’.³⁹³ What is required, to cope with this, is a ‘repetition theory’ capable of explaining ‘how, in late capitalist mass culture, the “received” role of repetition as an ego-control function was in part “socialized” and extended into a political power’ with ‘the associated *plaisir* turning masochistic’ and ‘the pleasure of control sliding into that of being controlled’.³⁹⁴

I am not going to offer such a repetition theory here; for one thing, Middleton’s argument is much more directed towards riff-based repetition rather than the formal repetition through standardisation which is of central interest for our purposes. What I do want to take from Middleton, however, is an encouragement of the counter-Adornian idea that repetition in popular music doesn’t have to mean that this music has to have no political power. What popular music can do, I would argue, is encourage a certain degree of solidarity; this, on my view, is its greatest political potential. Would such a politics be postmodernist? Perhaps, in a way, for solidarity does not have to be contingent upon the aesthetic novelty which, as we saw above, was a key element within modernism; but perhaps not if the grand narrative of political emancipation having some teleological and emancipatory end-point is nevertheless still in the air. Can repetition in popular music push us towards a final cause such as the Marxist ‘glorious day’? The question is certainly moot and will require careful handling in chapter six below. For now, let us at least acknowledge that it is an aporetic question: we cannot decide in advance the role which popular music could play within some final revolutionary push nor what the character of music would necessarily be in a post-revolutionary society. The proof, in the end, will be in the pudding, as we say in England; in other words, the resolution of the aporia could only be decided if and when a revolutionary

³⁹³ Middleton, *Studying*, pp.289-91.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.291.

horizon brings forth a revolutionary new society. Only then, from a Marxist point of view at least, can we uncover a reliable picture of the new socio-cultural possibilities (including, of course, the role of a cultural-artistic area such as music).

Perhaps, then, the arguably postmodern character at the base of popular music does not preclude this music from a political potential. Having said this, we must acknowledge that for many commentators there is a significant limit to the political potential of postmodernism overall. For present purposes, such critiques need to be taken seriously: if popular music is necessarily postmodern and postmodernism is necessarily either apolitical or, at best, is politically weak, we need enquire no further as the political potential of such music.

Fortunately for the ambition of the present book, however, I think there is room for argument not only as regards the alleged postmodern character of popular music but also, arguably, as to the political importance of the postmodern critique. For the purpose of further enquiry, let us turn firstly to some comments on this topic from Angela McRobbie in her 1994 monograph *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*.

McRobbie is certainly sympathetic to the idea of postmodernism yet she is also willing to query its political efficacy. We can note, for example, that she proposes that postmodernism has not been helpful to a 'political bewilderment and disappointment of the left' which, in the eighties and very early nineties, had led to the loss of the left's 'sense of urgency'.³⁹⁵ She also suggests that, for some feminists at least, it is necessary 'to argue for some of those great modernist values: truth, objectivity, reason'.³⁹⁶ Of further interest still, for our purposes, is McRobbie's suggestion that the relativism which many have argued postmodernism entails means that 'we now run the risk of entering into a meaninglessly pluralist paradigm for

³⁹⁵ Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.46.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.64.

studying the popular'.³⁹⁷ The problem is that such would be a situation 'where everything goes, where only in the popular does there lie the possibility of resistance, and where unpopular questions like the value to young people of reading literary classics rather than teen magazines are simply no longer asked'.

These last comments demonstrate that McRobbie's postmodern turn had not entailed a complete break with the ideas of, say, Richard Hoggart (inaugural director of Birmingham's famed Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and, like Raymond Williams, a cultural theorist who could never quite bring himself to fully jettison a faith in great literature despite a concurrent interest in popular culture). One might say that McRobbie turned to postmodernism, then turned away from it, vacillating back and forth in uncertainty as regards its efficacy for the left (the 'turn, turn, turn' mentioned in the title of the present chapter). This is at least the impression I gain from reading her monograph and, indeed, from reading many other critical commentaries relating to postmodernism. If postmodernism entails 'relocating Marx in a less universalistic mode', is that a good thing?³⁹⁸ Sure, to the extent that it encourages us to pay attention to issues which classical Marxism in general, and the Birmingham CCCS (of which McRobbie had been part) in particular, had somewhat overlooked: issues around race, gender, disabilities and so on (everything that falls beyond the purview of a strict class analysis, that is). Perhaps not, though, given the loss of urgency which, as noted above, had begun to arise at the time McRobbie was writing (and which many will say the left has suffered with epidemic levels of demoralisation in the twenty first century, furthermore). Without its 'universalistic mode', how can the logical coherence of Marxist theory be maintained?

³⁹⁷ Ibid, p.94 for this and the next quotation.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, p.64.

The great fear, of course, is that indeed such coherence cannot be maintained: universality was the logical cornerstone of Marx's argument from at least the *German Ideology*-period onwards, and without it the whole 'house of cards' seems to collapse. We will return to the problem of postmodernism for the principle of universality below. For now, I want to ruminate on some ideas of McRobbie's which could be argued, on my view at least, to offer a paradigm whereby popular music could perhaps be understood as empowering its participants (even in a 'political' sense, to some degree at least) *without* a heavy reliance upon a politics of novelty. The passage in question pertains to a growing 'constituency for ragmarket shopping' which, borrowing from Angela Carter, McRobbie calls 'recession style'.³⁹⁹ The adjective is wonderfully connotative: one meaning of recess, as any graduate of the American school system can tell you, is a break in the regular flow of things; the adjective can also refer to a difficult or hard to reach spot. Naturally our first thought is that the ragmarket shopper is 'skint' (as the English working classes will often say) thanks to an economic recession. On my reading, however, McRobbie (and possibly Carter, too) is hinting that the ragmarket shopper (a 'thriftstore' type, as Americans might say) is not only finding a solution to the impoverishment which 'the recession' has imposed. Additionally, to some extent at least, this 'recession style' shopper is breaking with the regular flow of consumer capitalism by digging around in the dark recesses of the thriftstore or ragmarket.

Perhaps I am reading too much in to McRobbie's argument. What is unarguable is that, on her view, the 'retro' clothing which allows such shoppers to "quote" from past sources should *not* be placed 'unproblematically within that cultural terrain marked out by Frederic Jameson as the sphere of postmodernity'.⁴⁰⁰ Such a placement, she goes on to insist, 'would

³⁹⁹ Ibid, p.152.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

be to conflate retro-dressing as merely yet another [sic] cultural re-run' whereas such trends 'require much more specific analysis'. I agree wholeheartedly with McRobbie on this point: by 'rediscovering these items and imaginatively re-creating them', the young women (but she could have mentioned young men, in fact, for the tendency she is analysing has male agents also) are living actively and creatively; they are, we might say, casting light into the recess.⁴⁰¹ A comparably active creativity is in play, I would suggest, when twenty first century young people make or listen to music which seems to an older generation to be of a 'retro' flavour. In fact, the music seems not retrogressive but fresh and exciting to the young ears, I would maintain. It is new, even when the young person is listening to an archive recording which is literally old. It is new because, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, it is not the recorded object which is being animated by the listener but rather the listener who is coming to life in the music.⁴⁰²

With McRobbie, I feel that postmodern is an imperfect adjective to apply to the process of retrospective re-appropriation which she is discussing (and which I feel is also a significant impetus within twenty first century popular music). I want to argue in chapter six below that young people, when they decide to create or listen to music which is ostensibly linked to a bygone era, are not displaying some acquiescent acceptance of the status quo (capitalism, as we call it). Rather, I would contend that such listeners feel alive and empowered when they play or listen to music regardless of any associations with the past which the music might otherwise seem to convey. We will see, furthermore, that many makers of popular music are

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, p.153.

⁴⁰² Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library' in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.69: 'ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in [the collector]; it is he who lives in them.'

using ostensibly 'retro' music to promote an agenda with a clearly left-orientated agenda. Sceptics can complain that the gesture is postmodern and empty ('retromaniac', as some might put it), of course. If Hans Bertens is right that 'any of a dozen theorists' will agree that postmodern politics are 'wholly incompatible' with 'redemptive politics of any kind', however, then we can be confident that such young people will reject the postmodern label.⁴⁰³ There are innumerable young people, as I will show in chapter six, for whom redemptive politics and fundamental social change are very much in demand. Perhaps popular music has literally no contribution whatsoever to make to consciousness raising on the left. Even then, though, it is hard to see that a band which is calling explicitly for social change, if and when that call is interpolated through a musical form which is far from novel, is simply offering a depthless 'blank parody' of the pre-existing musical form. On the contrary, a bit more is happening here, I am quite sure.

What, though, of the impasse which McRobbie hints at regarding the universalism of classical Marxism, on the one hand, and the 'micropolitics' which is perceived (with good reason, I think) to have proliferated within the recent (postmodern, as many will call them) decades, on the other hand? I will not pretend that a handful of young musicians' and music fans' demonstration of a thirst for social change easily takes us past the impasse in question. I do want to give at least brief mention to some ideas which derive from the closing pages of Steven Connor's *Postmodernist Culture* (first published in 1989).

On Connor's view 'the task for a theoretical postmodernity of the future must be... to forge new and more collective forms of ethical collectivity'.⁴⁰⁴ In denial of 'those who will see this as just another spineless relapse into universalism', Connor proposes 'the creation of a

⁴⁰³ Bertens, *The Idea*, pp.186-7.

⁴⁰⁴ Connor, *Posmodernist*, p.277.

common frame of assent which alone can guarantee the continuation of a global diversity of voices'.⁴⁰⁵ The theory of 'postmodern ecology' which Connor goes on to sketch (drawing credibly on Derrida, Levinas and Heidegger) is fascinating but too complex to properly discuss here. What we can say, however, is that such scholars have been attempting for some time to think a way past the postmodern critique without simply declaring a (retrogressive, ironically enough) post-postmodern return to the old left Marxism of yesteryear. This does not mean that this author would not appreciate such a re-ignition, in broad terms. Whichever way one looks at it, though, there are surely at least some elements of the Russian and Chinese efforts at installing socialism in one country which one would not want to see repeated.

For this reason, I am somewhat unconvinced by the dismissive attitude towards postmodernism which is displayed by Alex Callinicos in his 1989 text *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*. As a matter of fact, I am in full agreement with a great deal of what he says: certainly I could never approve of a theory which 'amounts to an aesthetic pose based on the refusal to seek either to comprehend or transform existing social reality'.⁴⁰⁶ Is this really all that we can find in the body of work which is associated with postmodernism, however? In the end, I feel that Callinicos sweeps too broadly, writing as though the experience of the twentieth century should leave little if any serious doubt about the extent to which Marxism remains a watertight and, as they say, 'correct theory' for the future. It is not that one is entirely convinced by the 'post-Marxism' which one reads about; far from it in this author's case, indeed. It is just that a proposal such as Best and Kellner's in *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* of a 'need for new theoretical constellations and

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Callinicos, *Against*, p.170.

strategies to which postmodern theories could continue to contribute' seems, on my view at least, a far more measured response to the best elements of postmodernist theory.⁴⁰⁷

My feeling is much the same with regard to Žižek's joking title to a chapter in the *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* text which he co-authored with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau. With characteristic aplomb, Žižek reminds us of an old Groucho Marx gag: offered 'Tea or coffee?', Groucho responds 'Yes please!'.⁴⁰⁸ On Žižek's view, 'the false alternative today's critical theory seems to impose on us' is a chimera: despite this imposition, we can in fact 'have our cake and eat it'. For this reason, Žižek names his chapter 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes Please!' It's a good line, but one can't help but feel that at least some elements of the acres of critical prose amassed under the title of 'postmodern theory' (for Žižek, even Derrida can be placed under this title) must cast at least a shred of doubt in regards to any unquestioning return to classical Marxist class analyses. Perhaps this reads as an *adieu* to the working class: no such farewell is intended here, however. If postmodernism is correctly understood as being a movement in opposition to the on-going class struggle then there is good reason to query it. Is that what postmodernism always is and is it all that it ever is, though? I am inclined to think otherwise; in any case, I would maintain that a dismissive return to, say, a facile modernist logic and/or a vulgar Marxism (not that I am accusing Žižek of either of these things, of course) would be problematic. Marxism is intrinsically vulgar, one might say, to the extent that it revolves around those who have nothing to lose but their chains (it is not easy to demonstrate good taste when one hasn't 'two sticks to rub together', as we say in England). I think, though, (or

⁴⁰⁷ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: MacMillan, 1991), p.298.

⁴⁰⁸ Butler, Laclau and Žižek, *Contingency*, p.90.

at least hope) that the reader can at least agree that things are not exactly the same today as they were, for example, in 1848. That given, we should at least offer some engagement with the theories of the day – such, indeed, is precisely what I have attempted to do here. To synthesise the pluralism and ‘micropolitics’ of postmodernism with the inherent universalism of Marxism would be beyond the scope of the present text; but I am convinced, for the record, that the troublesome question of, let’s say, ‘minorities’ *is* a crucial one which renders an unreconstructed return to Marxist (anti-)business as usual a dubious step for the coming years.

Chapter Conclusion

It is hard to imagine modernism having never happened. Could it have been possible that, for example, a Brahms-like compositional style could have been salient throughout the tumult of the two world wars? In order for this to have happened, I would suggest that aesthetic time, if I can put it like that, would have needed to stand still, as it were. In practice, such did not happen: the closing years of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth were years of great aesthetic innovation and, therefore, it feels as though modernism had to happen. That said, I have attempted to show that hostility to tradition was less marked in the high modernist era than it would become in the late modernist period.

It is the latter period’s modernist tendencies which, I have argued, really brought artists and critics alike to valorise the ‘shock of the new’ more emphatically as a value in itself. Perhaps, I have suggested, we can see the late modernist moment as being postmodern in a sense: it was, it seems, one of if not the first time that artists and musicians were confronted with a sense that the rejection of tradition had, ironically enough, become a tradition in itself.

However, late modernism is arguably not quite postmodernist to the extent that the full array of characteristics which are normally associated with postmodernism are not yet in play. I

have treated late modernism as something of a period in its own right, therefore, exploring aspects of free jazz which, it seems to me at least, bear an interesting relationship to not only certain developments within late modernism but also certain key impetuses which can be broadly associated with aspects of modernism overall.

Postmodernism, meanwhile, turns out to not fit perfectly with the developing tendencies of popular music in the post-war years: if the Beatles were ‘the chief example of the emerging modernist ethos in rock music’, it is surely notable that this occurs just as painting and fine art seem to turn more strongly towards postmodernism around the late sixties.⁴⁰⁹ Pop/rock’s alleged modernist moment is misaligned with high art’s historic periodisation, then; on my view, furthermore, the idea of a correspondence between the evolution of high art periods and the post-war development of popular music is highly dubious, as I have attempted to show here. Meanwhile the argument that popular music hits a postmodernist retrogression at a certain point (the seventies, the eighties, the nineties, depending on who is arguing) ignores the fact that repetition and standardisation have always already been a core element within this area of music. Even given the modernistic aspect of the Beatles or whoever, in other words, it can be argued that popular music is always already postmodern to at least some extent. A breakdown between high and low culture can emerge if and only if we have a low culture with which to endanger the status of high art; the possibility for postmodernism begins with the emergence of a popular culture.

There are problems, then, with the mapping of modernist and postmodernist histories of the arts to popular music’s rather distinctive history. Having said that, popular music *does* seem to move with the times: we noted in chapter one, for example, that Britain’s music hall

⁴⁰⁹ Barry J. Faulk, *British Rock Modernism 1967-1977: The Story of Music Hall in Rock* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p.47.

tradition seemed fresh at a certain point but subsequently came to feel like old hat to an overwhelming body of the working class at a certain point in the early twentieth century. The key question, for our purposes, is as to the political impact of this shift. On this question, let us offer some consideration of the ideas of Raymond Williams offered in *The Long Revolution*.⁴¹⁰ Because Williams is interested in the critical strength of living individuals, he draws a schema which emphasises that – on differing occasions – the formula ‘artist’s new language, initial resistance, eventual acceptance’ gets disrupted.⁴¹¹ The obvious alternative and thinkable possibilities are ‘artist’s new language, initial acceptance, continued acceptance; artist’s new language, initial acceptance, eventual rejection; artist’s new language, initial resistance, eventual rejection’. Williams adds that ‘this range is what we should expect, for communication is a process between real individuals, who are all learning’. ‘Whether the new descriptions [of the artist’s new language] will become a new general way of seeing will depend on the direction of the common experience,’ he argues.

This move is highly daring, I would contend: Williams effectively unshackles the question of the best direction for our common experience/trajectory from the question of novelty. Instead he assumes that it is living individuals who will confirm or deny the applicability of the artist’s work relative to our social needs and preferences. This, in the end, seems to me the best solution to the political-aesthetic tug of war as regards modernism, postmodernism and novelty: to hitch our colours to neither tradition and social realism, on the one hand, nor radical novelty and modernism, on the other hand. Rather, I would suggest, we must hold faith in *the critical judgements of the masses of ordinary people who, in fact, can make or*

⁴¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013).

⁴¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.55-6 for all quotations in this paragraph.

break any potentially revolutionary moment. It is they and only they, after all, who can truly create a new society.

Returning, then, to the quotation from Lampedusa offered at the top of this chapter – ‘if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change’ – I want to suggest that the opposite might also apply: if we want things to change, there will doubtless be many things which stay the same. (Astute readers will realise that Lukács has already said much the same in quotations I have offered above.) One of these elements might perhaps be popular music. In any case, I am not convinced that today we require a radically new form of pop to stimulate a change in society. In the next chapter, therefore, I want to drill down to some of the most widely discussed thinking in contemporary scholarly discourses around novelty, politics and artistic creativity: the arguments of Alain Badiou. Do we need a radical aesthetic before we can have a radically different society? Could popular music contribute to social change? I would suggest that these questions are at least worth arguing over.

Chapter Five: Badiou and the Popular Event

Although his writings have attracted a growing readership in recent years, it appears to be possible that ‘many people approaching Badiou’s work for the first time may scarcely notice that novelty is posed as a problem’.⁴¹² What is the problem of novelty, for Badiou? In this chapter I will argue that, in short, the problem is that without radical novelty, on Badiou’s view, there can be no radical politics. This point of view is apparent within a wide range of texts from Badiou upon which I shall draw herein. Let us be content with a single quotation, for the time being: ‘Political thinking demands a displacement, a journey which is always,

⁴¹² Sam Gillespie, *The Mathematics of Novelty: Badiou’s Minimalist Metaphysics* (Victoria: Re.Press, 2008), p.137

dare I say it, abnormal.⁴¹³ Is this abnormality analogous to novelty? I would argue that such is very much the case. Indeed, when Badiou adds that ‘For example, in May ’68 and after in France, when the intellectuals went *en masse* to work in the factories, they embarked upon an absolutely abnormal journey’, he is very much emphasising the radical novelty of the event (Badiou never tires of emphasising the novelty of ‘the events of May ’68’).⁴¹⁴

My concern, with regards to this way of thinking, reduces in large part to the following: if something like what Badiou describes here was a novel and absolutely abnormal event, shouldn’t we nevertheless want to continually repeat it such that every day factory workers could have their toilets cleaned by a professor? Even his ‘May ’68 and after’ begs the question as to whether this ‘and after’ involved the repetition which Badiou decries elsewhere. We will examine his objections to repetition in more detail below. What is more important, as we begin to engage with Badiou, is to start out from fundamental issues such as the division of labour (which, after all, is obviously what is at stake in Badiou’s comments here). Normally, in ‘advanced’ capitalist societies, intellectuals are not expected to labour in factories whilst, conversely, little or no intellectual demands are placed upon the common worker. May ’68 seems to have thrown forth some important challenges to this state of affairs. Surely the most important thing, though, is not merely the novelty of the challenge to the ‘normal’ division of labour; the call for a re-drawing of this division is fundamental to not only Marxism but also countless other orientations within the left, in any case. Surely, rather, the fundamental question as to how the necessities of social labour should be divided *as a rule* is the core issue? If it is the case that intellectuals should contribute more to the less glamorous forms of work which are felt to be necessary for the society, shouldn’t we dig our

⁴¹³ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005), p.63.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

heels in and insist upon such a principle regardless of the vagaries of fashion and politicking, regardless of the date on the calendar? Whether a principle is novel or, conversely, is a repetition from a set of established principles is neither here nor there, one might argue: isn't the important question as to whether the principle is just, right and proper?

My critique is reductive and brutal, perhaps. It is a fair summary, however, of the overarching nature of my scepticism as regards the writings of Badiou. 'If a truth is something new, ... the essential philosophical problem... is the problem of its appearance and its "becoming"', he argues; but the 'if', here, is of obviously pivotal importance.⁴¹⁵ Badiou makes legitimate claim, as a philosopher, to using every day words such as 'truth' or 'event' in a special and highly technical manner, granted. We will need, therefore, to gain some feel for what he means by truth in the example at hand. This and other key terms within Badiou's lexicon will be explored in section one of the present chapter. For now, however, it is perhaps not unreasonable to remark that, if a truth does *not* have to be 'something new', perhaps the problem of its becoming and its appearance is less essential than it might otherwise seem? Badiou adds that 'For a truth to affirm its newness, there must be a supplement... I call it an event.'⁴¹⁶ The word 'supplement' suggests a Derridean trajectory, but the application here is markedly different from that which we should expect from Derrida. For the latter thinker, supplementarity is always already an element within the ('impossible') process of semantic transfer and, therefore, newness of a sort is always in play (more on this below). For Badiou, by contrast, the event is a rarity, as we will see.

Badiou also displays a marked difference from Derrida when he makes an association of 'justice' with 'the possible truth of a political orientation' and offers the bald statement that

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, p.45.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

‘Equality is subjective’.⁴¹⁷ Badiou’s main point, with the last statement, is that equality ‘does not refer to anything objective’; he offers at least a caution against facile presumption, then. It is unfeasible, however, that Derrida would begin a three-word sentence with ‘Equality is...’; for Derrida, equality and justice are always already impossible (although justice is nevertheless always ‘to come’) and are therefore never ‘possible truth[s]’. There is, then, a significant gap between the ideas of Badiou (probably the most influential French philosopher working today) and Derrida (arguably the most important continental philosopher since Althusser, perhaps since even Heidegger). The ideas of both are significant for a consideration of the politics of novelty, however, and I will offer a comparison of the ideas of these two giants of recent philosophy in section three of the present chapter, alongside consideration of other contemporary and recent thinkers’ work on, approximately, the politics of novelty.

The middle section of the chapter, meanwhile, will be used for an examination of Badiou’s markedly hostile attitude towards popular music. How convincing is his critique? How well justified, and musically informed? These will be the key questions for the middle section of the chapter. I begin, however, with some discussion of Badiou’s overall arguments regarding ontology, mathematics/‘science’, art and ‘the’ event, as promised.

The Event of Badiou’s Philosophy

Summarising Badiou’s philosophical project for a readership which may have no prior familiarity with his writings is a somewhat daunting task for a number of reasons. For one thing, the corpus is huge: three major works – *Theory of the Subject* (1982), *Being and Event* (1988) and *Logics of Worlds* (2009) – and countless minor writings. For another, Badiou

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, p.53 and p.54.

employs algebraic formulæ to substantial effect, rendering some aspects of his argumentation tricky to comprehend for the non-mathematician. Most importantly, the theories he offers are complex and wide-ranging, involving a large amount of technical language. These issues noted, I will not pretend that the following discussion of his writings offers an adequate adumbration of his overall thesis: doubtless there are significant elements of the argument which I fail to capture here. Moreover, my reading is somewhat selectively focussed upon those elements of Badiou's argumentation which are most germane to my topic in the present text.

I begin with *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou's first major work according to most commentators. Bruno Bosteels' introduction to the rather belated translation of this text into English in 2009 notes that Badiou's then-recent *Logics of Worlds* 'is written from a self-confident position of international fame'.⁴¹⁸ The same cannot be said of *Theory of the Subject*, however: at the time Badiou composed this tract, he was writing in the shadow of (and, to a significant extent I would argue, in contradistinction to) major figures within French theory such as Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze. Many of his arguments have remained substantially the same over the last thirty years, however, and thus this text is as good a starting place as any for a discussion of Badiou's overall position, as well as an interesting foreshadowing of ideas which he would develop more stridently in his later work.

An early pointer to a position which I have already mentioned above is Badiou's remark that 'there are few subjects and rarely any politics'.⁴¹⁹ It is comments such as this which bring Bosteels to speak, in the introduction to the English translation, of Badiou's insistence upon

⁴¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London: Continuum, 2009), p.xxvii.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, p.28.

‘the rarity of a subjective intervention’.⁴²⁰ Why this rarity? On my reading, the spectre of class influences the basis of the argument. Badiou suggests in the second paragraph of his text that ‘I have nothing to profile, if not the certainty that I have... that the modern philosopher is – as Auguste Comte said already so long ago – a systematic proletarian.’⁴²¹ In a footnote Badiou clarifies that ‘For Comte, each proletarian is a spontaneous philosopher and each philosopher is a systematic proletarian – with “proletarian” carrying above all a moral or spiritual sense as opposed to the political and economical uses of the term in Marx.’⁴²² This is sleight of hand, many would argue: the word ‘proletarian’ ripped from any political or economic basis is certainly not in keeping with Marxism, as Badiou concedes. Many non-Marxists will also find the application of the word peculiar, indeed (what *is* this moral/spiritual sense of being proletarian, we might ask?). We can note that elsewhere, a few pages before the end of the book, Badiou adds that ‘Defeatism is the spontaneous philosophy of proletarians.’⁴²³ Badiou may think himself entitled to complain of the ‘coarseness and stupidity’ of the proletariat, but it is nevertheless possible, no matter what Comte might have said, to challenge Badiou’s ‘certainty’ that modern philosophers such as he can be systematically profiled as proletarians.⁴²⁴ Some of the latter constituency, if asked, would even dare to turn the accusation of stupidity back upon Badiou, I think.

Theory of the Subject demonstrates Badiou’s somewhat unorthodox approach to Marxist principles, then. We can note, for example, his complaint about a ‘somniferous Marxism for the lecture hall’. Although this comment, from a Marxist point of view, is not necessarily

⁴²⁰ Ibid, p.xxii.

⁴²¹ Ibid, p.xxxviii.

⁴²² Ibid, p.341.

⁴²³ Ibid, p.328.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

unorthodox in itself, it reflects Badiou's willingness to write polemically against the salient Marxists of the day.⁴²⁵ His argument that 'the Leninist party is incommensurable to the tasks of the transition to communism' is more markedly unorthodox.⁴²⁶ That said, in this text and throughout his corpus, Badiou identifies as a communist, referring to 'we communists' herein, for example.⁴²⁷ He is interested in the role of the masses in historical change, without question, referring to them as 'the real that the partisan subject retroactively encounters in any break in historicization'.⁴²⁸ What is crucial, though, for the Badiou of *Theory of the Subject* and, indeed, for the great bulk of his subsequent work, is the relationship between this 'partisan subject' and the chance for something entirely new to emerge: 'The masses are not the substance of history but *the prohibition to repeat*'.⁴²⁹ Badiou is always hostile, presumably for this reason, to systematic repetition in communistic endeavours.

One must be cautious here, however: Badiou is simultaneously hostile to 'the leftist renegade, the repentant Maoist, whose sales pitch... is that nobody will catch them red-handed again'.⁴³⁰ This hostility is also manifest in Badiou's subsequent warning that, if we 'Hand over education to those who got tired of antagonism... It will be everyone for him or herself, nobody will pretend to speak for anyone whatsoever.' Such a situation would be unacceptable for an unrepentant Maoist such as he: 'This is the surest road towards the worst. When one abdicates universality, one obtains universal horror.' This, then, is where Badiou parts most strongly from the bulk of continental Marxism-influenced philosophy of the last fifty years or

⁴²⁵ Ibid, p.24.

⁴²⁶ Ibid, p.204.

⁴²⁷ Ibid, p.92.

⁴²⁸ Ibid, p.136.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, emphasis retained.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, p.181 for all quotations in this paragraph.

so. For him, it is essential to retain a universalist outlook, to hold faith in the possibility of a radical and entirely novel ‘event’ and to resist any tendency towards relativism, ‘opinion’ and the theories of repetition which Deleuze and others were developing around the time in which *Theory of the Subject* was written.

Badiou is a Marxist, of some stripe at least, then; but his Marxism has been frequently unorthodox. We can see this even when he is quoting directly from the *Communist Manifesto*’s argument that ‘Communists... have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole’: Badiou concludes that communists ‘are, in the movement of history, the political subject. That is the point from which *we must start again*.’⁴³¹ Why this recommencement? Because ‘it is materialism we must found anew with the renovated arsenal of our mental powers’; because, in other words, communism needs to begin again, pushed into a novel phase by the (rare/partisan) political subjects who are situated firmly within their historical context.⁴³² The role of novelty for this re-birth of materialism is made clear through a bifurcation of ‘mechanicist’ and ‘dynamicist’ materialisms: the former ‘knows only the law of the place’ whereas the latter ‘is a radicalism of novelty. It breaks all mirrors.’⁴³³ The Badiou of *Theory of the Subject* seems to fully endorse neither: ‘Materialism is always in the position of having to resist the temptations that found it: neither atomic deciphering nor liberation of flux.’ In his later work, however, we will see that he has become bolder in his faith in novelty.

This hesitation (relative to his later stridency) can be uncovered in Badiou’s qualification regarding his statement that ‘every great scientific discovery amounts to a purification’

⁴³¹ Ibid, p.183, emphasis added.

⁴³² Ibid, p.182.

⁴³³ Ibid, p.207.

because ‘in comes an order that cannot be brought in line with former customs’.⁴³⁴ Although such is the case, he qualifies that ‘Every science forms a party; just look at their congresses. Will you say that *nothing* is transmitted on this side of things?’ He suggests otherwise: ‘No... some newness is caught in the act and transmitted therein.’ Badiou’s interest is characteristically focussed upon ‘the lightning bolt of disruptive communication’ yet he seems to allocate at least a marginal (‘in the margin of the text’) possibility of productive transmission between, to use his example, Descartes, Fermat, Pascal ‘and others’; again, then, he seems to sit on the fence a little as regards the possibility of some absolute rupture.

On Bosteels’ view, Badiou avoids settling for ‘either... an absolute but empty discontinuity or... a lasting but predictable continuity’: ‘the whole trick consists in combining these two orientations in an open-ended dialectic of beginnings and re-beginnings’, he suggests.⁴³⁵ How convincing is this ‘trick’, though? And how original, as philosophy? Certainly the trick has notable precedents from Empedocles to Hegel, not to forget Marx. I would not say that Badiou has nothing to add to these thinkers; on the contrary, the very fact that he is promoting ‘the idea of communism’ in the twenty first century is a welcome addition to the contemporary menu, given the despondency so widely drudged up in academia and elsewhere. That said, there is something worryingly self-evident about the fact that, on the one hand, ‘If you take a bird’s eye view of May ’68, you will see in it a new and qualitatively irreducible breath or aspiration’, an ‘exceptional and radically new point of concentration’. The problem is that, on the other hand, ‘May ’68 is really only a beginning, and continuing the combat is a directive for the long run.’⁴³⁶ *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même-chose*, one

⁴³⁴ Ibid, p.40 for all quotations in this paragraph.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, p.xxvi.

⁴³⁶ Ibid, pp.41-2.

might say: if May '68 felt radically new but was in fact simply another nod in the right direction, dare we ask what's *really* new about it? We have, after all, had comparable nods in the century or so which led up to that date, and before that also, indeed.

Badiou consciously theorises against an enthusiasm within French philosophy for theoretical work on repetition, and yet in *Theory of the Subject* he seems somewhat more ambivalent than he will later become: 'All truth is new, even though the spiral also entails repetition. What puts the innovative interruption into the circular flexion? A certain coefficient of torsion.'⁴³⁷ Doubtless Badiou has in mind here something like the key Deleuzian concept of the 'rhizome', which is plural and non-linear: on balance, that said, Badiou's thinking in *Theory of the Subject* tends towards something like teleology (more comparison of Deleuze and Badiou will be offered in section three of the present chapter). Either way, it is surely the case that interruption of repetition requires no absolute innovation in order to be interruption, strictly speaking. In the end, indeed, all one needs is something other than pure repetition to arrive: if that arrival is itself a repetition, but not a repetition of that which was being repeated up until the interruption, it remains nevertheless an interruption of repetition irrespective of its recognisability in broader terms. (To give a UK-centric and non-revolutionary example, the arrival of the New Labour government in 1997 broke the repetitive cycle of Conservative governments since 1979 even though we had obviously had Labour governments in the past and, therefore, the Labour government of 1997 was itself a recognisable repetition *as well as* being an interruption of repetition.)

What, then, of the Badiou of *Being and Event*? I am following Bruno Bosteels in stating that Badiou has produced three major works. However, I think few would deny that *Being and Event* is by far the most important of these three. Here, with remarkable boldness, Badiou

⁴³⁷ Ibid, p.121.

strikes out in favour of the mathematical ontology which is probably the most striking feature of his mature work. In the words of Peter Hallward, Badiou argues that ‘Mathematics does not describe, represent, or interpret being but is, in itself, what can be thought of being *tout court*’.⁴³⁸ Hallward adds, with admirable balance, that Badiou ‘might easily dismiss’ the tensions between mathematics and ontology as highlighted by Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, but in fact the dispute is not ‘so easily resolved’.⁴³⁹ What, then, is the problem with the equation of mathematics and ontology?

On Hallward’s view, Badiou ‘banishes from ontology’ the sensual ‘feel for the world’.⁴⁴⁰ Questions remain, however: for example ‘how what is present relates to what is represented’.⁴⁴¹ Moreover, ‘the question of relation in its broadest sense’ is a key concern about Badiou’s thinking for Hallward; for us, the particular question of ‘representation’ (which implies repetition) is also vital here.⁴⁴² On Badiou’s view, the four precise ‘conditions’ of his theoretical work in *Being and Event* ‘must all be met if philosophy is to exist’; for Hallward, however, ‘The absence of mathematics alone would seem to condemn entire cultures to a prephilosophical untruth’.⁴⁴³ With this, Badiou risks implying that ‘certain cultures are rather more animal than others’; Hallward notes that this risks damaging ‘the status of African philosophy, to take only one of several obvious examples’.⁴⁴⁴

⁴³⁸ Hallward, *Badiou*, p.54.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid*, p.105.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.106.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.106.

⁴⁴² *Ibid*, p.xxxv.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid*, p.281 for both Badiou’s and Hallward’s comments.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

This gives us some feeling as to what Badiou means with the first term in the title of *Being and Event*; what, though, of the ‘event’ itself? On Hallward’s view it ‘is indeed a kind of creation ex nihilo, a chance to begin again from scratch’ and a break with hierarchy.⁴⁴⁵ (Hallward has read Badiou well, I would say: the latter is unequivocal, for example, that ‘An event is the creation of new possibilities’ and frequently emphasises the need for a break with hierarchy.⁴⁴⁶) ‘A historical situation contains an evental site’, Hallward goes on to explain, whereas ‘a natural one does not’.⁴⁴⁷ ‘Unlike Deleuze’, Hallward asserts, ‘Badiou maintains that no merely natural movement, however convoluted or convulsive, can be the vehicle of genuine change’.⁴⁴⁸ Again, then, a certain rarity is emphasised; the rarity of the event itself, which is always a novel event (‘the exception’, as Badiou puts it in *Philosophy in the Present*).⁴⁴⁹ For Hallward, ‘Badiou’s entire philosophy is geared to the rigorous description of innovation as such’.⁴⁵⁰ He argues, overall, that the ‘fundamental and immediately striking move in Badiou’s philosophy, the move that sets him apart from his contemporaries, is his affirmation of the strict, uncompromising universality of truth’.⁴⁵¹ This summary certainly fits well with the reading *Theory of the Subject* which I have offered above: if ‘True subjects... first and foremost are free of relation’ and ‘Both truth and subject are occasional,

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, p.114 and p.119.

⁴⁴⁶ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010), p.242.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, p.119.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, p.120.

⁴⁴⁹ Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p.12. For Žižek, the event involves ‘the Badiouian sense of the rupturing new’, p.58; there seems to be a general agreement, then, between Badiou and his followers, that the event must be a novel event.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, p.xxi.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid, p.xxiii.

exceptional', it should be obvious that the themes of rarity and a 'partisan subject' which I have highlighted above are pertinent here also.⁴⁵² For Badiou, "fidelity is the opposite of repetition" or routine'; truth, by contrast, steps away from repetition and routine.⁴⁵³ In the end, as far I understand it, the event *is* truth and novelty: at least, only an event can spark the novel sequence of fidelity which is the precondition of truth. Badiou is in any case absolutely clear that the event is the precondition for any revolutionary politics: 'Every radically transformative action has its origin in one point.'⁴⁵⁴

The concept of the event is vital for the argument which Badiou wants to make, then; a concept which emerges most strongly in his *Being and Event*. There, Badiou suggests that various elements are necessary for the event to become possible: an 'evental site', a particular 'situation' and at least one element which points toward 'the void set'. On my view, the most easily assimilated explication of Badiou's ideas is probably Christopher Norris's *Derrida, Badiou and the Formal Imperative*. It is this book, therefore, to which I would direct the reader who has found my efforts thus far towards explaining Badiou's thinking difficult to follow.⁴⁵⁵ What is important in Badiou's work, according to Norris, is a recognition that 'certain foundational issues in philosophy of mathematics should be thought to have a bearing on issues in political theory'.⁴⁵⁶ Norris concedes that Badiou's ideas can appear as an 'absurd conjunction of set-theoretical with political-activist concerns'.⁴⁵⁷ In the end, indeed, he seems to almost throw his hands in the air when he suggests that, from a Badiouian

⁴⁵² Ibid, p.xxxi and p.xxv.

⁴⁵³ Ibid, p.128.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, p.107.

⁴⁵⁵ Christopher Norris, *Derrida, Badiou and the Formal Imperative* (London: Continuum, 2012).

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, p.8.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, p.47.

perspective, ‘mathematics *just is* fundamental ontology’.⁴⁵⁸ For Norris, who is in fact highly sympathetic to Badiou’s work, a certain leap is necessary if we are to accept the French theorist’s argument: ‘self-evident truth must itself *ipso facto* be taken as a true belief’ and this is ‘the necessary (i.e. the sole adequate) basis’ for Badiou’s fundamental claim.⁴⁵⁹ In other words, Badiou insists that truth ‘is verification-transcendent in the sense of always potentially exceeding what we are able to prove, demonstrate or even plausibly conjecture regarding it’.⁴⁶⁰ This reading is consistent with my own understanding of Badiou’s position. However, I find it impossible to accept that truth is always only excess, and that only the (rare) excessive supplement from the void (the Badiouian event, that is) can enable what Badiou calls truth. Rather, on my view, truth could perhaps be a consistency, a repetition, something which can arrive again and again as truth (especially musical ‘truth’, if such a thing exists – see next section of the present chapter for more on this question).

Turning now to Badiou’s third major work, *Logics of Worlds*, the key themes and ideas remain substantially similar relative to *Being and Event* and *Theory of the Subject*: primarily Badiou is developing certain elements and rectifying or modifying aspects of his theory which have been challenged by others, or re-working his ideas with new cases. (Some of these new cases are musical, and we will explore those in the next section of the present chapter.) For example, Badiou suggests that ‘I am now able fundamentally to equate “site” and “evental multiplicity”... without any recourse to a mysterious naming’ which had been challenged precisely for its mysteriousness by certain commentators and peers. In order to do this, ‘in place of the rigid opposition between situation and event, I [now, in *Logics of*

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, p.168, emphasis retained.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid, pp.168-9.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, p.101.

Worlds] unfold the nuances of transformation, from mobile-immobile modification all the way to the event properly so-called, by way of the neutrality of fact.⁴⁶¹ The interested reader can consult the text for more detail as to how this unfolding is developed. For our purposes, the headline here is that the Badiou of *Logics of Worlds* retains the bulk of his earlier ideas, only changing certain elements within the theory as a response to specific critiques. It is still the case in this text, for example, that ‘We reserve the name “event” for a strong singularity’ and that this event will therefore still have a rarity.⁴⁶²

I will leave my comments on *Logics of Worlds* at this brief level here, in order to make space for discussion of some of Badiou’s minor texts. Specifically, I want to pick up on a theme which is highlighted by Bruno Bosteels in his introduction to the English translation of *The Adventure of French Philosophy*. The theme which Bosteels develops there is around the question as to whether we can retain hope for political change even if we decide that the event does not necessarily need to be rare and novel. On Bosteels’ reading of Badiou, ‘Unless we adopt the model of *organic growth*, with novelty unfolding naturally or virtually out of one and the same order, the key is to understand how change is not just the effect of an element of chance or contingency added onto a pre-existing structure from the outside’.⁴⁶³

From the standpoint of this organic growth (‘the paradigm of life or nature’, that is) ‘Ideology, for instance, simply does not exist’, Bosteels asserts. The idea that there is no such thing as ideology would seem to have some foundation in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, he suggests. However, does the basic idea of ‘novelty unfolding naturally’ (rather than under rare conditions, as Badiou insists) necessarily have to leave us, as Bosteels insists

⁴⁶¹ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2009), p.361.

⁴⁶² Ibid, p.374.

⁴⁶³ Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy* (London: Verso, 2012), p.xviii.

it does, with ‘no hope’, no ‘critical consciousness’ and a necessity that ‘nothing changes at all’?⁴⁶⁴ I would suggest otherwise: ‘to apprehend events where others see only stable identities’, I would argue, is what every parent does when their offspring utters its first word, and what every pop fan does when they profess enthusiasm for a song or singer which, for example, their parents consider to be ‘old hat’ or ‘the same old pop rubbish’.⁴⁶⁵ Perhaps holding faith in organic growth over and above a Badiouian novelty-from-the-void entails ‘grasping oneself as event’.⁴⁶⁶ Even if such an onanistic individualism *is* a necessary corollary of this organic growth idea – and I am far from convinced that such is the case (the parent, for example, grasps the birth of their child as a significant event, but it is not quite ‘oneself’ which one grasps in that event, surely) – it seems rather a large leap to assume that this self-grasping ‘also entails a dissipation of the subject’ and ‘life itself as a continuous, singular, and impersonal event’.⁴⁶⁷

Does organic growth have to be ‘impersonal’? Again, family relationships would seem relevant for the testing of this claim. Significant events within family life – first day at school, first serious row with a parent and suchlike – involve felt-novelties which, observed from the outside, are somewhat consistent with stable identities. Nothing changes at all, one might want to say, because such normal (or ‘organic’) events are really just what is often named as the ‘rite of passage’ of the average Western childhood. However, it is hardly the case, from within the family, that relationships are perceived as impersonal. Doubtless we need a radically different society, and no doubt this can be expected to entail re-drawing the

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, p.xix.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid, p.xx.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

character of family life.⁴⁶⁸ Even given some new post-familial social arrangement (come the glorious day), however, surely the new system, once established, *could* develop steadily and somewhat organically rather than requiring a Badiouian radical novelty? Didn't Marx promise us a full individuality in a communist society, after all?⁴⁶⁹ Might this, then, involve life itself as a continuous, singular and *highly individual* event, to paraphrase Bosteels? And what might music-making involve, in this new society: universal recognition of the genius of Schoenberg or, perhaps, a society where 'anyone in whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop without hindrance', to quote Marx?⁴⁷⁰ Without hindrance: what could hinder this 'anyone' from so developing? The hindrance, I would suggest, could well be the remnants of a value system – an ideology, I want to say – which presumes that novelty is necessary for personality, for expression, for value.

⁴⁶⁸ Marx and Engels explicitly propose the '*Aufhebung*' of the family in the Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848: Political Writings Volume 1* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), p.83. This German word is commonly offered up as 'abolition' in translations of the Manifesto, but Hegelians will want to remind us that it also implies other somewhat contradictory meanings in German: to lift up, to cancel/suspend, to 'sublate', and so forth. Clearly, then, the Marxist position on the family is not quite a simple expulsion of all familial ties. That said, Marx was emphatic (and, as in so many things, well ahead of his time in arguing) that 'the modern family contains in germ not only slavery (*servitus*) but also serfdom... It contains *in miniature* all the contradictions which later extend throughout society and its state', quoted in Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, in Connection with the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1978), p.66, emphasis retained.

⁴⁶⁹ See, for example, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p.117: 'the task of replacing the domination of circumstances and of chance over individuals [with] the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances' is the task of communism, which will bring 'an all-round development of individuals', the authors insist.

⁴⁷⁰ Marx and Engels, *German*, pp.108-9.

The Badiou of *The Adventure of French Philosophy* is very similar, in tenor, to the younger Badiou who wrote *Theory of a Subject*. The novelty of ‘May ’68’, for example, is still very much in his mind: ‘These revolts were qualitatively new because, being organised by nuclei of young workers who frequently were not unionised, they also proposed to overturn the internal hierarchy of the factory’.⁴⁷¹ The problem, here, is this idea that such is ‘qualitatively new’: what is being described seems simply to be a wildcat strike and such was hardly novel in 1967-8, even if they occurred in France, at that time, on a larger scale than had ever been seen before (which is arguable, I think). Perhaps the event(s) in question was (were) *quantitatively* new, then; but it is extremely hard to accept the idea that the difference was *qualitative*, since – as everyone knows – the young in general, and young proletarians in particular, are very often hot-headed and willing to confront authority (‘hierarchy’) with spontaneous defiance.

A remarkable element of Badiou’s argumentation – especially in his minor works, I would suggest, where he tends to write in a less guarded and less methodical manner – is the banality of the examples he typically supplies of supposedly-novel political agency. In *The Communist Hypothesis*, indeed, he seems to acknowledge this problem himself: ‘A banal yet crucial discussion with four workers and a student in an ill-lit room must momentarily be enlarged to the dimensions of Communism... a moment in the local construction of the True’.⁴⁷² The problem, here, is that Badiou tells us elsewhere (in *Infinite Thought*) that ‘A political situation is always singular; it is never repeated.’⁴⁷³ The latter being the case, how can the ‘moment’ in the ‘ill-lit room’ constitute a political situation: surely, after all, the very

⁴⁷¹ Badiou, *The Adventure*, p.104.

⁴⁷² Badiou, *The Communist*, p.255.

⁴⁷³ Badiou, *Infinite*, p.61.

fact that such interactions are ‘banal’ indicates that the basic structure (workers interacting with other segments of society with whom they might normally have an antagonistic relationship) is part of a repetition of a clear sort? Consider, for example, Trotsky’s argument that, during the revolutionary ‘five days’ of February 1917, ‘In a totally different way the workers approached the soldiers.’ Trotsky clarifies that ‘Around the barracks, sentinels, patrols and lines of soldiers, stood groups of working men and women exchanging friendly words with the army men.’ On his view, ‘This was a new stage’ and yet ‘*Such a stage is inevitable in every revolution. But it always seems new*, and does in fact occur differently every time’.⁴⁷⁴ Comparing May ’68 in France with Russia’s five days in February, I would suggest that the former was as much a repetition as it was a ‘singularity’ (as Badiou likes to say): it was, indeed, an arrival of what I call a new sense (a felt-to-be-new moment which is nevertheless a repetition to a significant extent, that is).

Similar problems arise within his recent *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, wherein Badiou’s central area of interest is ‘the striking novelty of the riots in the Arab countries’.⁴⁷⁵ As we should expect from Badiou, novelty is of pivotal importance within his argument: drawing on Brecht, for example, he demands ‘a new figure of organization and hence of politics’.⁴⁷⁶ Surely, though, Brecht was interested in a new society, certainly organised in a new way, but not necessarily involving a ‘new’ politics? After all, the Marxism which Brecht was unmistakably faithful to (in a way that Badiou, by contrast, is not) was very much a tradition, developed and negotiated by some remarkable intellects over many decades by the time that Brecht engaged with it. Badiou has made no secret of his

⁴⁷⁴ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto, 1977), pp.123-4, emphasis added.

⁴⁷⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2012), p.33.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp.42-3.

belief that ‘the party-form is obsolete’ and therefore the ‘struggle’ against ‘state identity... is the main problem bequeathed to us by the state communism of the last century’.⁴⁷⁷ Brecht could never have agreed with the use of the word ‘obsolete’ here although, if he had our twenty first century luxury of hindsight, he perhaps might want to *query* the value of the party form. To so emphatically brush aside the party form, however, with a demand for an entirely new ‘figure of organisation’ is to risk history repeating itself as farce. Regarding the Arab uprisings, for example, Badiou asserts that ‘Our turn is going to come (again). And for us the central problem will be political organisation’.⁴⁷⁸ Perhaps so (one can hope that such is true, indeed); but Rosa Luxemburg – to pick just one example from the Marxist tradition – could hardly agree that this ‘central problem’ has never been faced before.

Badiou may be correct that ‘the militant dimension of a particular type of organisation, which was called “communist party” for some decades in the twentieth century... must doubtless seek a different name today’.⁴⁷⁹ Surely, though, there is a risk of loss when such a re-branding is undertaken? Perhaps there is ‘an enormous problem for today: inventing a revolutionary political discipline which... does not follow the hierarchical, authoritarian and quasi-mindless model of armies or storm troopers’.⁴⁸⁰ On the other hand, though, perhaps the nature of class war necessitates elements of hierarchy and authoritarianism until the withering away of the state allows the hierarchy to dissipate. These are old problems, and I will not pretend to have the answers to them myself. What I do want to stress is that, if one surveys Badiou’s writings, fundamental difficulties become apparent which are troubling even for the

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid, p.80.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, p.65.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, p.66.

sympathetic reader. Even Badiou's dismissal of anarchism ('which has never been anything else than the vain critique, or the double, or the shadow, of the communist parties, just as the black flag is only the double of the shadow of the red flag'⁴⁸¹) is puzzling when one realises how anarchistic much of his thinking is (the rejection of the party form, for example, and the clear preference for spontaneity within political agency).

It is not the purpose of the present text to challenge Badiou's overall work, however. Rather than further diverting into a discussion of politics and philosophy, therefore, I turn now to Badiou's ideas about art and, more importantly for our purposes, music. It is here that we will gain a greater insight into the importance of Badiou's ideas for our discussion of popular music and the politics of novelty.

We're Not Worthy

It is regrettable, one might argue, that Badiou nowhere offers the kind of explicit distinction between *neuf* and *nouveau* which Roland Barthes once made. For Barthes, the latter (which implies a newness to an owner but not necessarily a fresh-from-the-factory newness) is a 'good' novelty whereas the former (which denotes a brand new/off-the-peg novelty) is 'bad': 'A *nouveau* which is not entirely *neuf* – that would be the ideal state of the arts', he concludes.⁴⁸²

Badiou's thinking, at least as it reads in English, does not promote a novelty which corresponds to the *nouveau* in the sense which Barthes emphasises, I would argue; rather, it seems to me, he calls emphatically for a novelty which is brand new and certainly not a novelty which could have been pre-worn. Consider his request in *Logic of Worlds*, for

⁴⁸¹ Badiou, *The Communist*, p.155.

⁴⁸² Roland Barthes, *Barthes by Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): pp.131-2.

example, that we ‘consider a sequence of musical works – say those of the great Viennese composers between Schönberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) and Webern’s *Last Cantata* (1943) – as constituting a subjectivated artistic body’. The ‘say’, here, is somewhat comical given that this is the sequence (Schoenberg and the second Viennese school) to which Badiou returns over and over, thus he pretends to have randomly selected an example which, in practice, he has referenced with marked regularity in his work. More to the point for our purposes, however, is his subsequent claim that ‘in the context of tonal music’s patent impotence’ this music ‘produces systematic effects of rupture together with the sedimentation of a *new sensibility* (brevity, the importance of silence, the unity of parameters, the breakdown of the musical “story”, etc.).’⁴⁸³

What is the importance of this ‘new sensibility’ and how does it allow the music to be ‘potent’? As I read Badiou, he holds faith that such radical novelty in the arts has a nuisance ability for the current political hegemony (capitalism, that is). I will say more about this faith and its credibility shortly. First, though, let us look at the letter of Badiou’s claim regarding the achievement of Schoenberg’s music. According to Badiou, ‘the Schönberg-event... breaks the history of music in two by affirming the possibility of a sonic world no longer ruled by the tonal system’.⁴⁸⁴ This break is absolute, Badiou insists: ‘In place of the system of scales and of the fundamental harmonies of tonality, there will be the free choice of a succession of distinct notes, fixing the order in which these notes should appear or be combined, a succession that is called a series.’ In this event, supposedly, ‘the twelve tones of the old chromatic scale... are no longer hierarchically ordered by tonal construction and the

⁴⁸³ Badiou, *Logics*, p.46.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid, p.80 for this and all other quotations in this paragraph.

laws of classical harmony'. Instead, Badiou claims, 'they are treated equally, according to a principle of succession which is chosen as the underlying structure for a given work.'

The voluntarist character of this 'free choice' should be obvious. Voluntarism, however, is a problematic concept; especially when the supposedly 'free' choice occurs in a field which is saturated with historical contingencies (the equally-tempered chromatic scale, for example, which obviously did not simply drop out of the sky fully formed). Far from being created 'on the basis of rules unrelated to the permissible harmonies of tonality', indeed, this 'Schönberg-event' actually has a wide range of precedents which led compositional method towards the dodecaphonic approach (key works by Debussy and Wagner, for example). This is not to say there is no sense of newness in Schoenberg's music; however, serialism is not quite the rupture from the void that Badiou supposes it is. Granted, serialism does not follow the tonal laws of standardised Western harmony. It is, however, hardly free from being 'hierarchically ordered': on the contrary, this is probably the most lawful music ever created.

Badiou's next move, within the text in question (*Logic of Worlds*), is vital for our purposes. 'Within the development of "contemporary music"... the serial organization of pitches (the rule for the succession of notes in the chromatic scale) is a rule that easily sanctions a global form.' By 'contemporary music' Badiou means '*the only thing in the twentieth century which merited the name of "music"* – if we grant that music is an art and not that which some minister subjects to the demands of gruelling festivals'.⁴⁸⁵ Of course the swipe is hilarious – Schoenberg as the 'global form' of the twentieth century – but I would suggest that algebra alone will not be sufficient to persuade us of the force of Badiou's opinion. Popular music (the world of 'gruelling festivals', that is) as non-music? It is not quite what the stars of

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, p.81.

Wayne's World meant when they cried 'we're not worthy', of course, but this does seem to be Badiou's position: popular music is not deserving of the name.

Perhaps Badiou is correct; the Derridean part of my thinking wants to simply leave judgement to the reader as to just whether this is or is not the case. There is, that said, a need to challenge Badiou's implied claims to a musicological/scientific justification. Consider, for example, his argument that 'The local antinomy of "Berg" and "Webern", which is internal to the subject, constitutes the essential proof of "Schönberg".' This, Badiou insists, is 'just as, in the case of the subject that Charles Rosen has named the "classical style", the names "Mozart" and "Beethoven" prove with quasi-mathematical rigour that what inaugurally presented itself under the name "Haydn" was an event.'⁴⁸⁶ What is this 'subject'? It seems to operate between novelty and tradition: 'one will say that the (serial) subject opens a negotiation with the old (tonal) world' when 'you treat a series almost as a recognisable melodic segment'.⁴⁸⁷ This is quite so; but it rather casts into doubt the 'quasi-mathematical' discontinuity upon which Badiou insists. The use of the word 'proof', with which a claim to logical necessity is clearly implied, is of questionable validity in an artistic context (more on this shortly).

A particular conception of subjectivity is crucial to Badiou's 'Scholium' on 'A Musical Variant of the Metaphysics of the Subject' (the section of *Logic of Worlds* upon which I am focussing here). In section eight of this scholium, for example, Badiou argues that 'The sequential construction of a subject is easier in moments of opening, but the subject is then often a weak subject.' He goes on to argue that 'The construction is more difficult when it is

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid, p.83.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

necessary to cross points; but the subject is much sturdier.’⁴⁸⁸ This is fair comment, if slightly pedestrian as a philosophical observation: for example, Thomas Kuhn already illustrated for us, some decades ago, that ‘work within a well-defined and deeply ingrained tradition seems more productive of tradition-shattering novelties’ as compared with ‘work in which no similarly convergent standards are involved’.⁴⁸⁹ (It is obviously easier to surprise with the words ‘here I am’ if the other person in the room did not know that you were present.) In any case, the fact that for Badiou ‘Only the delicate crossing, through non-negotiable decisions, of some strategic points testifies to novelty’ means that that which is being crossed delicately (‘some strategic points’, with the last term here implying something to do with decision and aporia) would seem to conditionalise novelty on some level.⁴⁹⁰

Here, although Badiou’s argument is not so easy to unpick, it feels as though there is a tautology at base. Novelty, supposedly, is enabled by the crossing of a strategic point, on the one hand; on the other hand, though, this aporetic crossing demands a non-negotiable decision (the ‘Schönberg-event’, to use the case at hand, which ‘easily sanctions a global form’ we might recall). It feels, even after one has puzzled over Badiou’s algebra, as though the evidence of the novelty of the Schoenberg-event is itself Schoenberg’s novelty; and one might recall, with regard to this, Norris’s declaration that, within Badiou’s argumentation, ‘self-evident truth must itself *ipso facto* be taken as a true belief’ (see above). If there is something more to Schoenberg’s radical novelty than just Badiou’s insistence that this music is radically novel, it is fair to wish that some of his algebra could be replaced with samples of notation, I would suggest. At least, then, we might gain a clearer understanding of where

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid, p.84.

⁴⁸⁹ Quoted in North, *Novelty*, p.123

⁴⁹⁰ Badiou, *Logic*, p.84. See p.591 for the association of ‘strategic points’ with aporia.

exactly in the music we will find a novelty which is not contingent upon elements of the European/German musical tradition for our identification of it *as* novelty (the old Hegelian problem, of course). After all, he analyses Mallarmé's poetry line by line, word by word, in order to clarify his argument.⁴⁹¹ Why not do the same for music, using notation in order to show us exactly where 'the construction is more difficult'? Without it, it is hard not to feel that Badiou is merely dabbling in something about which he has little knowledge or training. Even without notation, that said, we gain some sense of what it is about Schoenberg's music which appeals to Badiou: 'The fact that this music is so often regarded as inaudible or unlistenable is due to this genius for disappointment.'⁴⁹² The latter 'genius' is signalled as an element of 'counter-effect'; but, again, we can question the application of the word 'genius' when a demonstrable genetic inheritance (as it were) of musical content is, in practice, precisely what is being countered (the unlistenable, that is, which is unbreakably contingent upon the listenable). The unlistenable character of the music, Badiou clarifies, will only be a concern for those who 'remain ignorant of its truth'.⁴⁹³ It is difficult not to conclude from this that we simply need to learn to listen more like Badiou does; and that we should forego any interest we might otherwise retain in 'the plurality of "music" – folklore, classicism, pop, exoticism, jazz and baroque reaction in the same festive bag'.⁴⁹⁴

Will an intelligent person be forced to agree with the logic of Badiou's argument? An observation from Harold Rosenberg seems to suggest otherwise: 'all modern geniuses are known to read detective stories and one doubts that Einstein's record collection included

⁴⁹¹ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp.130-1.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.89.

Schönberg or Varèse'.⁴⁹⁵ We can also note, as regards Badiou's conception of 'truth', Rosenberg's comment on the following page that 'the new [ie. Twentieth Century] audience is *truer* esthetically than former ones to the extent that it comes into being not through social status but through the magnetic attraction of the work of art upon random human particles'.⁴⁹⁶ Of course there is room for criticism of the proposal that art's 'magnetic' pull can magically evade the impact of social status upon economies of reception. However, it is surely interesting for our purposes that, for Rosenberg, an intelligent person can and typically does (in the 'modern' era, at least) take an interest in popular culture (detective stories, for example): nothing could be further from the ideas of Badiou. For the latter, such pluralism should be left to 'those disciples of Deleuze who are busy blessing, in unbridled Capital... the "creativity" of the multitudes'; with regards to any creativity involved in 'Seattle or Genoa' (mass demonstrations of our recent *fin de siècle*, that is), for example, Deleuze 'would have laughed up his sleeve'.⁴⁹⁷

Readers must judge for themselves whether such ridicule should be classed as revolutionary or counter-revolutionary when it is directed at those who are, in fact, prepared to take to the streets. It is at least clear, for now, that between Badiou and Žižek, from the point of view of the former at least, 'The future is in our hands.'⁴⁹⁸ In this glorious future, presumably, the genius of Schoenberg will be universally accepted. For the time being, however, the claim is highly problematic that a 'global form' was generated (substantially from nothing, don't forget) by this German composer. This has even been noticed by the greatest supporters of

⁴⁹⁵ Rosenberg, *The Tradition*, pp.60-1.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.62, emphasis added.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.387.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 563. We should add that the general agreement of Žižek with the pronouncements of Badiou is crystal clear in Badiou and Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*.

Badiou's thought, such as Peter Hallward. According to the latter, Schoenberg invented 'artistic forms detached from the limitations of content and meaning'.⁴⁹⁹ Many a musicologist would challenge this statement for a variety of reasons. Some, for example, have believed that music has no meaning in any case. Others, more recently, will insist that such a detachment is impossible (art without content – a philosophical conundrum indeed). Others still will doubtless want to ask whether content and meaning are truly 'limitations' (might they not, after all, be rather useful for the expressive work of the artist?). Hallward's assertion relies upon some musicologically dubious assumptions, then, but it is fair to say that his thinking on Schoenberg is akin to Badiou's. He is, as noted, very much admirer of our French theorist, holding an opinion that 'The situated quality of Badiou's theory certainly sets it apart from the altogether less precise musing on "community", "politics", and "ethics" proposed by some of his better-known neo-Heideggerian contemporaries and rivals (Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Agamben, Derrida again...)'.⁵⁰⁰ Nevertheless, even Hallward realises that Badiou's ideas about music fall on shaky ground, as becomes clear within their conversation in the English translation of the latter's text *Ethics*. Their exchanges on this topic are worthy of some attention for our purposes.

Within the conversation in question, Badiou seems to concede that he is 'speaking prospectively, slightly feeling my way forward' with regards to his ideas on musical truth and cultural specificity (such as the system of tonality) which Hallward attempts to solicit from him.⁵⁰¹ Hallward immediately challenges him: 'Just what is culturally specific here? How do we measure the immanent universality of an artistic truth, to limit the question only to

⁴⁹⁹ Hallward, *Badiou*, p.xxx.

⁵⁰⁰ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), p.xxxi.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.141.

that?’⁵⁰² Badiou responds that ‘No doubt it’s only because I’m of this era. Perhaps my own taste, my own site, my own set of interconnections [*réseau*] have been drawn mainly from this. But I certainly wouldn’t make of it a universal maxim’.⁵⁰³ He goes on to mention Rosen’s *The Classical Style* and its revelation of a ‘configuration’ or ‘artistic sequence’; this, he argues, would be different from relying upon ‘proper names’ (thus foreshadowing the adjustments to his theory which he will make in *Logics of Worlds*, see above).⁵⁰⁴ Badiou would seem, here, to be stepping back slightly from claims which he appears to make elsewhere that there can be a universal artistic and specifically musical ‘truth’. For example, he states within his *Ethics* that truths, ‘which are the great creations of the classical style, shall endure eternally’.⁵⁰⁵ By this he seems to mean that the stylistic ‘configurations’ in question possess some universal and permanent truth. He argues specifically that the event which was delivered through these ‘musical configurations was not comprehensible from within the plenitude achieved by the baroque style; it really was a matter of *something else*’.⁵⁰⁶ Badiou’s basic formula here is highly reminiscent of the Kuhnian idea of the paradigm shift, of course; the difference, however, is that for Kuhn no paradigm could offer a universal truth (thus Badiou’s thinking could never pave the way for a Feyerabend in the way that many suppose Kuhn’s thinking, by contrast, so did).

Badiou’s concession (as I read it), with regard to his own culturally specific standpoint, stems from a line of questioning opened by Hallward as follows: ‘What relation is there between an artistic – let’s say musical – truth, and the (culturally specific) system of tonality which

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Ibid, p.141-2.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid, p.142.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid, p.70.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, p.68.

ensures that the truths of Haydn and Schoenberg – to take examples from your *Ethique* – are always truths *for* certain listeners?⁵⁰⁷ The question is good, and we have already observed some notable hesitancy within Badiou's reply. The crux of this question can be roughly adapted as follows: how could something as culturally specific as an individual's response to a piece of music ever contain universal power, influence or engagement? Surely the 'truth' of music is always only a culturally specific truth, if indeed it is truly a 'truth' at all? Badiou, it seems, wishes to think otherwise and, it is worth noting, it would seem to be the case that, for him, size *does* matter: 'every significant event', he insists, must involve 'an extraordinary change of scale'.⁵⁰⁸ For Badiou, in other words, the event is always a big deal, always large scale, never a matter of local significance. The same basic assumption would seem to be behind his argument that 'not every "novelty" is an event': it is the 'matter of nomination' which makes the difference whereby 'the event calls forth and names ... the central void of the situation for which this event is an event'.⁵⁰⁹

Is such necessarily the case? The whole debate would seem to rest upon the question as to whether universality is possible: without universality, every event would reduce to a nameless, localised and thus impotent novelty, Badiou and his acolytes seem to believe. Yet what serious student or teacher of music could ever fail to notice that the very name 'classical', for example, is *not* universally understood? From my own experience of asking whole classes of pubescent-aged pupils in an inner city context to answer the chestnut 'What is classical music?', for example, a wild variety of responses would be heard, usually including the answer 'Led Zeppelin' ('classical music' confused, here, with 'classic rock').

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid, p.138.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, p.125.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, p.72.

One need not seek out the culturally-deprived, though: in the daily papers, on the bus and commonly on the BBC, classical music is the catch-all descriptor for anything that isn't pop/rock/'world': Thomas Tallis, Arnold Schoenberg, Wagner; 'it's all classical, innit?'

Obviously it is not: the history of European art music is divided into periods amongst which the classical era is merely one, as any GCSE music student can tell you. For this reason, amongst others, the idea of the classical as a universally recognised style is problematic indeed. As we have seen above, Badiou makes frequent reference to Charles Rosen's idea of the classical style. Let us divert for a moment, then, into Rosen's conception so that we can cross reference it against Badiou's usage of his ideas.

Rosen acknowledges from the outset of *The Classical Style* that it did *not* involve an absolute break with previous styles. 'It is possible', Rosen argues, 'to distinguish between the English language around 1770 and the literary style of, say, Dr. Johnson', whereas 'it is more difficult to draw a line between the musical language of the late eighteenth century and the style of Haydn – *it is even doubtful whether it would be worth the trouble to do so.*'⁵¹⁰ On the following page, Rosen adds that 'Although I believe the concept of a style is necessary for an understanding of the history of music, *I should not wish to dignify it with the status of solid fact.*'⁵¹¹ Given the two statements I have italicised here, many of Badiou's citations of Rosen become immediately dubious: for the latter, the 'Eventness' of the classical style is not quite as clear cut as Badiou would like it to be. On this point, for example, we can note that, for Rosen, Mozart's E flat Piano Concerto K.271 of 1775 is a pivotal example: 'perhaps the first large work in which Mozart's mature style is in complete command throughout'.⁵¹² 'The date

⁵¹⁰ Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (London: Faber, 1971), p.9, emphasis added.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid*, p.10, emphasis added.

⁵¹² *Ibid*, p.23.

is not arbitrary', Rosen remarks, and yet a piece of music 'five or ten years earlier could have been chosen for different reasons.'⁵¹³

Why 1775, then? 'It is only from this point on that the new sense of rhythm which displaces that of the High Baroque becomes completely consistent.' In the preface to the 1998 revised edition, Rosen is still enquiring as to the status of this new sense: 'To what extent does an innovative work depend on our expectations of standard forms, and to what extent are those expectations merely a *nuisance* to be cleared away before the new form can be understood for what it is?'⁵¹⁴ The weight of expectation, it seems, is a nuisance for the new sense upon which Rosen wants to focus; and, furthermore, he openly acknowledges in this new preface that Mozart's precursors (J.C. Bach, say, to give an obvious example) are 'Not irrelevant' if we want to understand a piece such as K.271.⁵¹⁵

K.271 is an interesting piece for discussion, and Rosen's analyses of the opening bars are extremely helpful for our understanding of its importance.⁵¹⁶ One can clearly see that Mozart has beautifully answered the orchestra's stately opening octave fall, followed by the rise of a fifth, with a much busier ('impertinent', to use Rosen's descriptor) piano part which rises across an octave and falls by a fifth. The orchestra's initial E flat minim is 'wittily' (as many will say) mirrored by a right hand trill from the pianist at the closure of bar three; it is 'classic Mozart', dare we put it this way. What is also interesting, for our purposes, however, is that Rosen does not try to pretend that nothing like this had ever been done before: 'The High

⁵¹³ Ibid for this quotation and the next.

⁵¹⁴ Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: Norton, 1998), p.xix, emphasis added.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid, p.xix.

⁵¹⁶ Rosen, *The Classical*, first edition, pp.59-60.

Baroque is capable of such contrast, but rarely aimed at this kind of balance.⁵¹⁷ *Rarely?* We have no reason to doubt the suitability of this word; we might add, though, that the word ‘never’ has not been chosen.

Rosen wants to say that something which feels new – ‘the new sense’ to which he refers – occurs with the arrival of the classical style from around 1775. He does not try to pretend that such an arrival has ‘the status of solid fact’, however. Badiou’s use of Rosen’s work is far from a perfect match, therefore, I would argue. The problem is obvious: the felt-as-new of music is always just a new sense, in practice. Try writing it down: any element which seems never to have been used before (some particular harmonic interval, say, or rhythmic peculiarity) can probably be revealed to have precursors at, if we can put it this way, the atomic level. For example, K.271’s delightful ‘answering’ of a minim with a trill is *not* unthinkable in a baroque context. Is this really something to worry about, though? Perhaps, rather, we might decide to say that an enculturated listener can sense an overall unity – beyond atomic novelty – in this concerto. If we can feel the arrival of a great musical voice, here, why concern ourselves with proving that what we feel is a ‘truth’ with some factual, universal and incontestable status? Perhaps it is worth risking the possibility that a listener might *not* judge Mozart’s music to be great. I would suggest, in any case, that this music needs no algebra to prove its worth – at least, not to my ears.

Let us return to Hallward’s evident concerns as regards Badiou’s claims about music. On the former’s view, what Badiou calls ‘the truth is true only for its subjects, not for its spectators’, thus ‘what Schoenberg sounds like to those brought up on Bach and Mozart’ does *not* disprove the eventness of the so-called Schoenberg-event.⁵¹⁸ As I read him, Hallward is

⁵¹⁷ Ibid, p.60.

⁵¹⁸ Hallward, *Badiou*, p.128.

searching for justifications of Badiou's position. Being aware that the latter's entire argument is precarious in the extreme when it comes to music in general and Schoenberg in particular, Hallward asserts that it is not the case that 'fidelity is a matter of blind or arbitrary faith. On the contrary, Badiou's model of fidelity is the "adventurous rigor" of mathematical deduction itself'.⁵¹⁹ Does this mean that we must try to enjoy Schoenberg's serial works for reasons of *mathematical* necessity? On my understanding, this seems to be the argument – and all this without a single notated example for us to consider.

We can observe similar concerns in Sam Gillespie's *Mathematics of Novelty*: 'subjects gripped by events can form reactionary – and hence untrue – tendencies in response to events (say, collective unities who oppose political revolution, people who regarded Schoenberg's music as noise, etc.)'.⁵²⁰ The juxtaposition, I would say, is telling: people who oppose revolution, people who don't enjoy Schoenberg's compositions; are we being told that these are the same people? Gillespie, I think, is hesitant on the matter – but I would say that the juxtaposition he has put together indicates that he has read Badiou well. We can also note Feltham and Clemens suggestion, in their introduction to the English translation of Badiou's *Infinite Thought*, that a subject, in Badiou's sense, emerges not through 'everyday actions or decisions... It is rather those extraordinary decisions and actions which *isolate* an actor from their context, those actions which show that a human can actually be a free agent that supports *new* chains of actions and reactions.'⁵²¹ 'The consequence of such a definition of the subject seems to be that only brilliant scientists, modern masters, seasoned militants and

⁵¹⁹ Ibid, p.129.

⁵²⁰ Gillespie, *The Mathematics*, p.116.

⁵²¹ Badiou, *Infinite*, p.5, emphasis retained.

committed lovers are admitted into the fold’, they go on to clarify.⁵²² Is this ‘A little unfair, perhaps?’ Yes, such is very much the case, Feltham and Clemens seem to conclude: ‘On the one side, you have human beings, nothing much distinguishing them from animals in their pursuit of their interests, and then, on the other side, you have the new elect, the new elite of faithful subjects.’ I would suggest that Feltham and Clemens have understood Badiou’s position well, recognising a ‘dangerous ring’ to his polemic.

On Feltham and Clemens view, what is at stake is ‘the ancient philosophical problem of how the new occurs in being’.⁵²³ Badiou’s attempt at a solution to this ancient problem, they argue, is to say that ‘In a ... pond, though there may be generation after generation of “new” baby fish, nothing really changes’. We are all just pond-life, then, with the exception of ‘brilliant scientists, modern masters, seasoned militants and committed lovers’. Arendt’s idea of natality as an important creation of novelty (‘the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth’) is barred from Badiou’s schema.⁵²⁴ The two philosophers are opposed to the extent that one might even say that they seem to speak different languages. The reader must decide which one is more credible, perhaps. What we can say, however, based on Feltham and Clemens’ reading of Badiou at least, is that the latter’s philosophy is not directly pertinent to activism: ‘Quite simply, if you want to do politics, go become an activist, go decide what event has happened in your political situation’; however, ‘If you want to do philosophy, try to think the

⁵²² Ibid, p.6 for this quotation and all further quotations in this paragraph.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p.211.

compossibility of contemporary events... (and, of course, read all of *Being and Event*...). Just don't confuse the two.'⁵²⁵

The caution is a wise one, I would say. Similar sentiments are echoed by John Hutnyk in his *Pantomime Terror: Music and Politics*. With specific concern that Adorno's and Badiou's fixation on 'Serious art' excludes 'the dreams, illusions and popular humour that workers might justifiably need in order to recover or occupy time in reserve', Hutnyk is deeply disturbed by 'the appearance of scholars handing out life(style) advice to activists and others'.⁵²⁶ Hutnyk is enthusiastic about popular music, is convinced that it can offer a valuable voice for the lumpenproletariat and is opposed to the idea that Marx was entirely dismissive of the lumpenproletariat as a politically important force for revolutionary change.⁵²⁷ He worries very much that Badiou and Žižek are 'big name theorists' who offer a 'consistent refrain that seems to be on auto-pilot, reiterating a negative assessment' of the actual interests and revolutionary potentialities of the masses.⁵²⁸ Žižek is 'waiting, with Badiou, for the event' but the consistent dismissal of actual revolts and uprisings in fact offers a 'deeply conservative negativity'.⁵²⁹ 'Does Žižek know the slums?' he asks, seemingly in exasperation.⁵³⁰ As for Badiou, Hutnyk is troubled by the references to "'sheep-like" assemblies of people' who offer a 'contagion' (and other disease-related metaphors which Hutnyk notes within the prose of Badiou) due to a certain repetition of revolt rather

⁵²⁵ Badiou, *Infinite*, p.25.

⁵²⁶ John Hutnyk, *Pantomime Terror: Music and Politics* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013), pp.167-8.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid*, pp.101-14.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid*, pp.72-3.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid*, p.79.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid*, p.105.

than any ‘evental’ novelty.⁵³¹ Hutnyk is shocked to observe that Badiou effectively labels the killing of Mark Duggan by the police (the event – but not an Event, in Badiou’s eyes – which sparked the UK riots of 2011) as a ‘misdemeanour’ and argues that the French theorist’s ‘characterisations of youth motivation’ are ‘deeply racist’.⁵³²

That last word may be an overstatement. However, I think anyone who has read carefully Badiou’s polemical asides on youth and popular music should recognise that Hutnyk is gesturing at a significant tendency within the French theorist’s work. Some admirers of Badiou seem to enjoy his antipathy towards popular music, of course. JPE Harper-Scott, for example, embraces Žižek and Badiou before declaring that ‘pop musicologists’ (one is tempted to ask Harper-Scott whether he thinks we are *really* worthy of the second term) consider ‘its practitioners are nobler, better people’.⁵³³ (I have no idea whose writings Harper-Scott bases this claim upon, nor can I guess what texts we should consult in order to learn more about the alleged ‘attack on Western art music as a whole’ within ‘scholarship on pop music’.⁵³⁴) James Little, although sympathetic to Badiou’s ideas in general, shows a

⁵³¹ Ibid, pp.74-5.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.186.

⁵³⁴ Ibid, p.251. According to Harper-Scott, ‘pop music... explicitly rejects the musical language of modernism’ and this is done purely for ‘increased saleability’, p.186. I find his comments on popular music and ‘pop musicology’ so vulgar that I will not respond to them at length other than by asking, if popular music has explicitly rejected the language of modernism, how can there be a category named ‘progressive rock’? The ‘prog’ harmonic palette, in fact, is often very much in keeping with the kinds of tonal experimentation which Harper-Scott illustrates with art music examples. There is something worryingly Nietzschean about Harper-

contrasting attitude to Harper-Scott with his concern that the French theorist ‘only describes the major artists of jazz as stretching from Louis Armstrong to Thelonious Monk’ which ‘leaves out the incredible contributions made by artists such as Ornette Coleman and the other great free jazz artists’. Furthermore, ‘Badiou’s contention that all popular music after Monk – including rock music and electronic music – should be counted as post-jazz “youth music” is similarly suspect.’⁵³⁵ Little’s work has faults (not least of which is his reference to ‘Phillip Larking’), but I would say that his concerns here are well-founded.⁵³⁶ The fact that Badiou stops at Monk is telling: jazz has a markedly Schoenbergian figure in (post-Monk player) Ornette Coleman, according to many (see chapter four above), but the latter’s work is conveniently bracketed off here. (It may be naïve, that said, to assume that Badiou could be interested enough to pay attention to the issue raised – namely, the question as to which is better, experimentation within a structure [Monk] or experimentation which is perceived to have ‘gone beyond’ tonal structures [Coleman]. It is quite possible, indeed, that Badiou is so little interested in the ‘youth music’ he dismisses that he is in fact entirely ignorant of the music known as free jazz.)

Badiou makes it clear, in the passage from which Little quotes, that he finds no importance in what he calls youth music: for example, he complains that ‘the video clip, a sub-product of youth music’ is responsible for a disastrous ‘fragmentation’. A rather odd moment preceding this passage is Badiou’s linking of ‘tonality’ with features such as film being ‘staccato, or hurried, or expanded, or slow and majestic’; features, that is, which have nothing whatsoever

Scott’s declaration that ‘The truth is strong and will prevail’, p.253. My impression is that, like Badiou, he regards those who lack fidelity to his chosen examples of musical ‘events’ rather as infidels.

⁵³⁵ James Little, ‘Philosophico-Musical Vision: Badiou, Žižek, and Music’ in *International Journal of Žižek Studies* (5/2), p.10.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid*, p.11.

to do with tonality in the musical sense (tonality in music being primarily a matter of functional directionality or, as we say, ‘horizontal harmony’).⁵³⁷ The sympathetic reader will want to note that Badiou is trying to adapt musical language to say something about film. For this reason he begins the sentence in question by saying ‘We will call rhythm...’, foreshadowing an intention to use terminology which is normally associated with music to describe film. However, the unsympathetic will want to suggest that this adoption is only likely to confuse readers with basic training in musical terminology. The latter constituency, indeed, might want to suggest further that Badiou consider dropping discussion of music in his future work, since it is already abundantly clear that he enjoys the work of Schoenberg above all other music. That given, perhaps Badiou should allow us to acknowledge his opinion and then judge for ourselves whether to show fidelity to this ‘evental site’.

I have inserted the word ‘opinion’ as a deliberate provocation to Badiouian ideas. For him, ‘opinion’ is material for ‘miserable creatures’ and is of no serious consequence: ‘the weather; the latest film; children’s diseases; ... the latest album by some hard-rock group’ and so on would be matter for opinion, he argues.⁵³⁸ Is Badiou entitled to make such a dismissal? My feeling is that he is not. Indeed, after surveying the vast bulk of English translations of his work, I think his claim that ‘my own taste, my own site, my own set of interconnections’ are not presented by him as ‘a universal maxim’ (see above) is disingenuous. On the contrary, as the reader should be aware by now, I think Badiou’s particular taste and ‘own site’ are universalised by him as ‘truths’. It is ironic, indeed, that he rails against Derrida, Levinas and the like-minded (or, at least, Badiou’s ‘genuine friend’ Peter Hallward interprets these as being Badiou’s key targets) by complaining that they are saying ‘Become like me and I will

⁵³⁷ Ibid, p.61.

⁵³⁸ Badiou, *Ethics*, p.51.

respect your difference'.⁵³⁹ The complaint is severely misguided: for Derrida (and indeed Levinas, and their philosophical ilk) the greatest *a priori* principle is that 'the other' can never dissolve into 'the same'. If anyone is proposing, through force of polemic and contempt for difference of opinion, that the other must 'Become like me' (that is, must recognise the truth of an individual's 'own set of interconnections', to repeat Badiou's phrase again), I would suggest that it is our object of enquiry here, Alain Badiou, who is guilty of making such a proposal.

Other Philosophies Subject to a Politics of Novelty

I hope, by now, to have made clear my reservations as regards Badiou's thinking on politics, art (and, more particularly, music) and novelty. I want to conclude the present chapter with some discussion of other, comparable philosophers whose thinking differs from his. Can we find a credible alternative to Badiou's desire for a 'new elite of faithful subjects', as Feltham and Clemens put it (see above)? Certainly; there are a number of such alternative ways of thinking about the inter-relation between novelty, politics and music (especially popular music), with differing levels of viability on my view. I begin with the theories of Cornelius Castoriadis, which bear certain resemblances to the ideas of Badiou even though, as Vladimir Tasić has noted, the latter has, surprisingly enough, remained almost completely silent with regard to the theories of the former.⁵⁴⁰

For Castoriadis, in his *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 'Creation, within the framework of inherited thought, is impossible.'⁵⁴¹ However, new things can happen, but only as creations

⁵³⁹ Ibid, p.25, p.lviii for Badiou's description of Hallward as a 'genuine friend'.

⁵⁴⁰ Vladimir Tasić, 'Mathematics and Revolutionary Theory: Reading Castoriadis After Badiou', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, (2012) 8/2, pp.60-77: 61.

⁵⁴¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p.196.

ex nihilo: for example, ‘the bourgeoisie was born (and, as a class, born truly *ex nihilo*)’.⁵⁴² ‘History presents itself immediately as succession’, he argues, but ‘Inherited thought is ... unable to grasp a succession in the social, except on the condition that it has made the latter an ensemble or is in the process of so doing’. The word ‘ensemble’ is vital here: for Castoriadis, ‘mathematics... is wholly subject to ensemblist or identitary logic’.⁵⁴³ He uses the word ‘ensemblist’ to connote mathematics in general and, more particularly, set theory – thus the similarity to Badiou which Tasić has noted. The *political* question of novelty is of vital importance to Castoriadis, without question: ‘The emergence of the new appears with a special intensity at times of upheaval, of catastrophic or great events that mark and punctuate the existence of societies’.

For Castoriadis, therefore, we should not simply declare novelty as being always everywhere all around us. Rather, he proposes an interesting dichotomy: ‘either the progressive decomposition of the content of historical life, the gradual emergence of a new society’ or, ‘if we look instead at people’s *work* as a tendency towards cooperation, we can interpret the ensemble of these phenomena as the emergence in society of the *possibility* and the *demand* for autonomy.’⁵⁴⁴ In some ways, here, his thinking resembles that of Badiou. However, he is far less preoccupied with the possibility of an arrival from the void as the pre-condition for a radical future, I would suggest. On the contrary, Castoriadis will not patiently await the event in the way that, according to Hutnyk, Badiou does (see above): ‘we consider it absurd to suspend all doing and not-doing waiting for someone rigorously to work out this total dialectic, or to discover at the back of an old cupboard the plan of Creation.’ He is emphatic

⁵⁴² Ibid, p.153.

⁵⁴³ Ibid, p.242.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid, p.99, emphasis retained.

that ‘We are not going to fall back into a stupor simply because we do not possess absolute knowledge.’⁵⁴⁵ For Castoriadis, then, we need not wait for some great man, some Lenin or Schoenberg, to inaugurate an event from the void: the revolutionary change will be ‘the doing of men and women in society’; a ‘thoughtful doing’ which would form at least ‘one essential component’ necessary for the ‘radical destruction of the known institution of society’.⁵⁴⁶

Castoriadis faces head-on the charge of ‘individualism’ (disapproved of by orthodox Marxists, of course). ‘People say to us’, he suggests, that ‘even admitting that there is a crisis of contemporary society, you cannot legitimately posit the project of a new society, for where could you draw the content for it, if not from your own head, your ideas, your desires – in short, from your subjective arbitrariness?’ Castoriadis’s riposte to this is that such a complainant has ‘chosen to forget... the history of the past 50 years’. During that time ‘the problem of a different organisation of society has constantly been posed, not by reformers or ideologues, but by massive collective movements, which have changed the face of the world, even if they have failed with regard to their original intentions.’⁵⁴⁷

His argument differs from Badiou’s more in tenor than paradigm, then. Both are agreed that the new society will require a radical break. That said, Castoriadis implies that this change will involve *alterations* which, in the first instance at least, are presently thinkable: ‘In life... as it comes to me and others, I run up against a lot of unacceptable things; I say that they are not inevitable and that they stem from the organisation of society.’⁵⁴⁸ This denial of what is unacceptable will require ‘first of all that my work be meaningful, that I may approve what it

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, p.101.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid, p.373.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid, p.98.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid, pp.91-2 for all quotations in this paragraph.

is used for and the way in which it is done, that it allow me genuinely to expend myself, to make use of my faculties and at the same time to enrich and develop myself.’ Furthermore, ‘I say that this is possible, with a different organization of society, possible for me and for everyone.’ This is because ‘it would already be a basic change in this direction if I were allowed to decide, together with everyone else, what I had to do and, with my fellow workers, how to do it.’ The tenor here, I would argue, is different from Badiou because it more strongly implicates today’s common life with the possibility for radical change. Based on the work of Castoriadis, one could argue that a popular music band, as an institution (imaginary, in a sense, but an institution nevertheless), can offer (to participants, including ‘the audience’) a glimpse of the possibility of a radically different future: the possibility to decide, broadly speaking, what to do and how to do it. I will say more about how this can be the case in the next chapter, but in short I am thinking of the ‘DiY’ modes of musical participation where a certain mutual collaborativity can sometimes be felt, it is often said. Based on Badiou’s writings, by contrast, I would think such an argument would not be possible, given the dispositions I have noted above.

Closer to Badiou’s position, I would argue, is Niklas Luhmann whose *Art as a Social System* insists that ‘Art permits no simple repetition.’⁵⁴⁹ On his view, ‘works of art... must be *new*, following the requirement, in place since early modernity, that they distinguish themselves from everything that has been done before’. There is no ambiguity, for Luhmann: ‘Only novel works can please.’⁵⁵⁰

It is rather odd that this argument is founded upon a quotation from Jacques Derrida. The quote is from *of Grammatology*; more precisely, it is the moment where Derrida first

⁵⁴⁹ Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000), p.4.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.44, emphasis retained.

introduces the term ‘trace’ – the very concept of which is predicated on non-presence, on the impossibility of a plenitude of presence in which something (works of art, for example) could distinguish itself from everything that has gone before. Presumably Luhmann could defend his reading. For a Derridean thinker, that said, it will be very hard to swallow the idea that ‘A communication cannot... proceed through simple repetition... It is not enough... to repeat what has been said (shown, perceived, or thought) once it dies away’; instead, according to Luhmann, ‘Something else, something new must follow, for the information component of communication presupposes surprise and gets lost in repetition.’⁵⁵¹ I have shown elsewhere that, in fact, Derrida explicitly implicates novelty with return.⁵⁵² In any case, Derrida would never condone a formulation such as ‘the information component of communication’, for this would be to argue that what is metaphysical (‘communication’) could be given full presence as a ‘component’ (after all, only that which has been fully present can ‘get lost’, presumably). More troubling, for present purposes, is Luhmann’s next move: art, he insists, ‘must always present something new, something artistically new; otherwise its communication breaks down or turns into general social communication about artistic quality, prices, the private life of artists, their successes and failures.’⁵⁵³ This is a thoroughly Adornian move: work which is comfortable with repetition boils down to ‘prices’ (read: capitalism) and frivolity. An inheritance from Adorno is also implied in a dichotomy which Luhmann draws. On the one hand we have the genuine novelty enabled by ‘the complexity of formal arrangements that ... provide an opportunity to discover something new, something that strikes us as more astonishing every time we look at them’. On the other hand, a thoroughly base alternative:

⁵⁵¹ Ibid, pp.49-50.

⁵⁵² Dale, *Anyone*, p.89.

⁵⁵³ Ibid, p.50.

‘Conversely, a work that lacks complexity [and] is compelled to offer more conspicuous or, to put it more bluntly, more scandalous forms of novelty.’⁵⁵⁴ This ‘scandalous’ novelty is never given the name by which we normally know it: popular culture. Instead, the text seems to take it as read that ‘art’ means, effectively, ‘high art’. Nowhere in the text can we find reference to the preference for repetition in popular music, for example. On the contrary, the assumption that repetition will be displeasing is everywhere: ‘only what is new can please’.⁵⁵⁵ Luhmann is unequivocal: ‘The work of art... displays something unexpected, something inexplicable, or, as is often put, something new’; the question ‘What’s the point?’ should always be referred back to the question of ‘what is already known’.⁵⁵⁶ In order to attain ‘autonomy’, the ‘improbability of novelty’ will be needed such that ‘art can surpass itself’.⁵⁵⁷ Who could be surprised when, a few pages later, Luhmann specifies this ‘drive of art to surpass itself’ as being exemplified in ‘atonal music’?⁵⁵⁸

On my reading, popular art becomes the unmentioned ‘elephant in the room’ within *Art as a Social System*. We are regularly reminded, for example, of an alleged need to distinguish between ‘art’ and ‘non-art’, but he does little to persuade us as to *why* this dichotomy is entirely necessary.⁵⁵⁹ Admittedly the text’s penultimate sentences warn that ‘what is admissible [in art] must be tightened’ precisely because ‘In the long run, handing out

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid, p.70, with a re-capitulation of the formula on p.265 and, in variations on the theme, many other points.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid, p.68.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid, p.154.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid, p.179.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid, see p.188, for one example of the alleged dichotomy in question.

commuters' passes instead of a divisive selection can hardly satisfy.⁵⁶⁰ It is also made clear that 'Choosing familiar styles as programs in an easily recognisable manner amounts to making a rather cheap claim to belonging to the art system, and often the works end up being not very convincing.'⁵⁶¹ Convincing and satisfying to whom, though – the lumpenproletariat? One assumes otherwise. A footnote acknowledges that this formula (familiarity breeds contempt, in essence, that is) will not work very well in the case of Stravinsky; Luhmann could have added that a great deal of Brahms' opus will also need to be acknowledged as 'cheap' on this basis, as well of course as the bulk of popular music.⁵⁶² ('Who cares?', though, one can imagine Badiou and JPE Harper-Scott shouting from the wings.)

On balance, then, there is a complete mismatch between the ethos of *Art as a Social System* and the outlook which I am encouraging in the present text. For Luhmann, 'the large number of individuals [in society] increases the likelihood that *some of them* turn out to be creative, innovative and powerful'; I would argue, by contrast, that we should strive for a world in which *all* of us might taste creative power.⁵⁶³ His idea of "'genius" as the product rather than the cause of evolution' is to be applauded.⁵⁶⁴ His insistence upon a formula that novelty equates with value (see above), however, is a poor match with music (popular or otherwise), I would suggest. With regard to 'successful art', he insists that 'the question is always whether to imitate... or whether the innovation is based on rejecting all previous criteria'; what kind of musician would hinge his work on such a basic criterion, though?⁵⁶⁵ Certainly not

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid, p.315.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid, p.209.

⁵⁶² Ibid, p.372 n68.

⁵⁶³ Ibid, p.223, emphasis added.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid, p.224.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid, p.230.

Schoenberg, who regarded his work as very much part of Europe's tradition of art music; and yet, with absolute predictability, we read on the same page a reference to the 'dissolution of frame conditions (such as tonality in music...)'.

Modern music 'goes far beyond rejecting the limitations of the tonal system. It focuses entirely on the tone that is actualised at any given moment, thereby destroying any possibility for memory and expectation of the sort provided by melody.'⁵⁶⁶ This is nonsense, in fact (the tone row, for example, requires memory and expectation/disruption of expectation and is not at all about discrete tones unrelated to each other). The larger point though, for our purposes, is that something very different from this is happening in popular music and, thankfully, even Luhmann will 'concede that the artist can be allowed to repeat himself [sic]' in certain conditions.⁵⁶⁷ She would not be 'allowed' by Luhmann to repeat herself *ad absurdum*, of course; but if this means that we, as fans of popular music, have to deny our music of choice the status of 'art', the loss of status is nevertheless somewhat alleviated by the insane pleasure we draw from hypnotic beats and pointless repetition.

The most obvious philosopher for comparison with Badiou's ideas about art, politics and novelty is arguably Gilles Deleuze. The comparison is obvious because Badiou has himself expounded at some length upon the similarities and differences between his own ideas and Deleuze's. He is not like Deleuze because 'I maintain that *every truth is the end of memory, the unfolding of a commencement*'.⁵⁶⁸ For Deleuze, by contrast, 'what always matters is folding, unfolding, refolding'.⁵⁶⁹ 'As for myself', Badiou responds, 'I cannot bring myself to

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid, p.295.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid, p.297.

⁵⁶⁸ Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.65, emphasis added.

⁵⁶⁹ Deleuze quoted in *ibid*, p.90.

think that the new is a fold of the past... This is why I conceptualise absolute beginnings'. Badiou wants this absolute beginning to be a political unfolding. (It is interesting to cross reference this way of thinking with his revelation that 'I boycotted practically all university and departmental events' when he and Deleuze were colleagues: surely such a boycott requires memory, repetition; how, then, could it involve any 'truth', in the Badiouian sense?)

As regards music in particular, Deleuze has argued that in modern music 'harmonics lose all privileges of rank (or relations, all privileges of order)' and 'divergences can be affirmed, in series that escape the diatonic scale where all tonality dissolves'.⁵⁷⁰ (The word 'harmonics' is confusing here, although the issue may arise only in translation: the hierarchy of natural harmonics, also known as the overtone series, is not something we can choose to 'lose'; and, therefore, Deleuze probably means *harmony*, not harmonics.) Based on Deleuze's claim, Badiou suggests that this 'means that our world... cannot be represented as Harmony'. He adds that 'it is this which we should joyously acclaim: not at all because divergence is in itself "superior" to convergence, or dissonance to harmony – which would simply be a surreptitious return to judgement and a transcendental norm – but because *this* is the world that is ours'.⁵⁷¹ The implication could hardly be clearer: dissonance is not arbitrarily or transcendently better than consonance, but it is a better reflection of *this* (capitalist) world. Such a way of thinking about music begs the question as to whether, come the glorious day, we will be allowed to go back to listening to tonal music. How useful would Schoenberg be in a post-revolutionary society? Since post-tonal music is implied here as offering an alternative to the existing world of social relations, there is good reason to think that, with the

⁵⁷⁰ Quoted in *ibid*, p.45.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid*, emphasis retained.

advent of a new post-capitalist society, such music would lose its importance: yet one more reason, many leftist music lovers will say, to wish for the arrival of the glorious day.

Concerning music, then, Badiou feels clear affinities with his erstwhile colleague: they both seem to believe that rejection of tonality is a metaphorical correlate of rejection of hierarchy (an emblem, we can note, common to many theorists we have encountered in this chapter – but not one which the present author is convinced by). ‘The fundamental semantic connection of the word “event”’, however, involves a marked divergence between the two thinkers, he argues: ‘on the side of sense for Deleuze, on the side of truth for me. Deleuze’s formula is irrevocable: “The event, that is to say sense”.’⁵⁷² ‘Truth’ for Badiou, as we have seen, involves ‘something new’. In contrast, ‘Repetition is’, for Deleuze, ‘the historical condition under which something new is effectively produced... Moreover, what is produced, the absolutely new itself, is in turn nothing but repetition’.⁵⁷³ Deleuze discusses physical repetition, psychic repetition, metaphysical repetition, ontological repetition and more, up to and including an ‘ultimate repetition’ which ‘encompasses everything... destroys everything... selects everything’.⁵⁷⁴ He goes on: ‘Perhaps the highest object of art is to bring into play all of these repetitions, with their differences in kind and rhythm, their respective displacements and disguises, their divergences and decentrings’. The contrast with the thinking of Badiou (not to mention Luhmann) should be obvious: ‘Art does not imitate, above all because it repeats; it repeats all the repetitions, by virtue of an internal power... Even the most mechanical, the most banal, the most habitual and the most stereotyped repetition finds a place in works of art’. For Deleuze, art should not be separated from the

⁵⁷² Badiou, *Ethics*, p.386.

⁵⁷³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 1994), p.113.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid, p.365 for this and all remaining quotations in the paragraph.

quotidian: ‘there is no other aesthetic problem than that of the insertion of art into everyday life.’ On the contrary, ‘The more our daily life appears standardised, stereotyped and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition’.

If this is not too much for Badiou, we can feel confident that Deleuze’s implied parity between Berg and Warhol (on the following page) must be: ‘Pop Art pushed the copy, copy of the copy, etc., to the extreme point at which it reverses and becomes a simulacrum (such as Warhol’s remarkable “serial” series...).’⁵⁷⁵ It is impossible to imagine Badiou judging Warhol as ‘remarkable’. There are strong divergences here, then, which have not gone unnoticed by a range of commentators. Sam Gillespie, for example, has remarked that ‘unless I am mistaken, a novelty for Badiou *is* truth.’ For Deleuze, by contrast, ‘Given that the *process* by which something new is produced is more important than its realization, the end-products of *any* intensive process could thus be said to enjoy an equally novel status.’⁵⁷⁶ On Gillespie’s view ‘there is no possibility for aesthetics for Badiou... art is philosophically important [for him] only insofar as it is capable of producing truths that are subject to various conditions established by mathematics (and, by extension, science)’.⁵⁷⁷ In contrast, from a Deleuzian point of view, ‘it is possible to have a theory of novelty that is not necessarily subjected to a criterion of truth... [and therefore] Deleuze’s philosophy is an aesthetic philosophy through and through’. The gap in Badiou’s thinking, according to Gillespie, is ‘a framework through which one can speak of how subjects are gripped by events.’ For this,

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid, p.166.

⁵⁷⁶ Gillespie, *The Mathematics*, p.19.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid, p.104 for this and all further quotations in the paragraph.

Gillespie suggest, Badiou needs Lacan: as Badiou's work stands, 'one is left with a rather brute minimalism to account for what truth can be in artistic practice'.

In the end, according to Gillespie, 'simply interrogating the systems of either thinker is unlikely to yield a decisive answer to the problematic at hand. We are at an impasse.'⁵⁷⁸ He is not entirely affirmative regarding the validity of Badiou's work, suggesting for example that it 'will probably, in the future, be met with resistance by philosophers of mathematics.'⁵⁷⁹ (We can note, indeed, that precisely such resistance is offered by Nirenberg and Nirenberg.⁵⁸⁰) On the other hand, though, Badiou is to be applauded because he leads us away from 'a postmodern, moribund cynicism or an ethical regulation of a smooth-running state of affairs.'⁵⁸¹ With Gillespie, we can applaud Badiou if he is leading us away from a regulatory maintenance of capitalist business as usual. The question is, though, has this been accomplished? Hutnyk, as we have seen, regards our French theorist as offering a 'deeply conservative negativity'. Hallward, who generally admires Badiou's work very much, admits that the latter 'might easily dismiss' the tensions between mathematics and ontology as highlighted by Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, but in fact the dispute is not 'so easily

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid, p.139.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid, p.146.

⁵⁸⁰ Ricardo L.Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, 'Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology', *Critical Enquiry* 37 (2011), pp.583-614. In conclusion, the authors declare that 'insofar as his mathematical ontology disguises the contingent in robes of necessity, it can only diminish our freedom. We can embrace the politics if we so wish. But we should not confuse this choice with mathematics, nor can we call it philosophy', p.612.

⁵⁸¹ Gillespie, *The Mathematics*, p.148.

resolved'.⁵⁸² Badiou, on Hallward's view, leaves key questions unanswered, then: for example, as noted above, 'how what is present relates to what is represented'.

On this last issue, we can turn to Derrida for problematisation of the Badiouian position. For Hallward, Derrida's ideas are anathema to Badiou's and he more or less invites the latter to comment critically upon the work of the former (amongst others) in the interview within the English translation of *Ethics*. One can note with interest, however, that Badiou does not offer any direct criticism.⁵⁸³ On the contrary, indeed, he has paid homage elsewhere to the older man, adding that 'I can count on paying homage again, and often, to Jacques Derrida, rereading his oeuvre, otherwise'.⁵⁸⁴ Badiou's thinking *is* radically otherwise to Derrida's, though, as the former acknowledges elsewhere: 'what is at stake in Derrida's thought... in strategic terms' is, at root, 'the *inscription of the non-existent*'.⁵⁸⁵ I find this account persuasive: there is a vanishing point, a '*point de fuite*', which renders 'Derrida's problem' as 'grasping a fleeing [*fuite*]'.⁵⁸⁶ Derrida's preoccupation with that which cannot be fully grasped and made present 'is obviously not suited to stormy times' of 'radical conflict' such as May '68 and its aftermath.⁵⁸⁷

Does Derrida attempt to grasp something which is fleeing? As I have just said, I am persuaded that Badiou has uncovered a real problem within the ideas of Derrida; one which has bothered other commentators. Jürgen Habermas, for one example, has complained that

⁵⁸² Hallward, *Badiou*, p.105.

⁵⁸³ Badiou, *Ethics*, p.107.

⁵⁸⁴ Badiou, *Logics*, pp.545-6.

⁵⁸⁵ Badiou, Alain, *Pocket Pantheon* (London: Verso, 2009), p.132, emphasis retained.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p.133.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid*, pp.138-9.

Derrida has been ‘idealistically fixated upon the history of metaphysics as a transcendent happening that determines everything intramundane’.⁵⁸⁸ Habermas’s goal, in the passage from which this quotation has been sourced, is to counterpoise his theory of ‘communicative action’ against Derridean relativism (or, perhaps better, the Derridean absolutism which interweaves trace and supplement so intimately that, in practice, no instantiation of agency can be said to be better or worse, let alone newer or more original, than anything else). To this end, he makes some interesting points about ‘the claims with which literary texts... are submitted to examination – claims to “artistic truth”, aesthetic harmony, exemplary validity, innovative force and authenticity’.⁵⁸⁹ Habermas’s critique of Derrida is not entirely convincing at a purely theoretical level. Where his work *is* persuasive, however, is in its counter-positioning of the importance of ‘innovative force’ and ‘the everyday world’, on the one hand, against the ‘expert cultures’ of philosophy, on the other hand. (We can also note that, unlike Badiou, Habermas places the idea of *artistic truth* within scare quotes, thus implying that his thinking may be closer to Derrida’s to some extent.)

This counter-positioning becomes of particular interest for present purpose on the following page where Habermas specifically states that ‘This *bridging function* of art criticism is more obvious in the cases of music and the plastic arts than in that of literary work’ due to the latter already involving language.⁵⁹⁰ The ‘bridging function’ in question is explicitly between ‘expert culture and everyday world’. In the case of music and plastic arts, ‘criticism performs a translating activity of a unique kind. It brings the experiential content of the work of art into

⁵⁸⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p.206.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.207.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.208, emphasis retained.

normal language; *the innovative potential* of art and literature for the lifeworlds and life histories that reproduce themselves through *everyday communicative practice* can only be unleashed in this maieutic way'.⁵⁹¹ This process brings 'a renovation of value orientations' which, being maieutic and part of the everyday, implies that expert cultures can in fact bring new values to non-expert individuals and, therefore, that the Derridean absolutism with regard to 'everything intramundane' (see above) is not helpful to, shall we say, the common man. For Habermas, by contrast, communicative action *can* allow expert culture – and in particular art criticism where it is applied to music, interestingly enough – to positively influence that intramundanity which, we might say, lies *below* the 'transcendent happening' of the history of metaphysics.

It is possible, then, to read Habermas as an encourager of a certain pedagogy of everyday interaction (maieutics) which absolute adherence to Derrida's position can be argued to preclude. Habermas calls for a deconstruction which 'has identifiable consequences' involving 'the paradigm of mutual understanding, that is, of the intersubjective relationship between individuals who are socialized through communication and reciprocally recognise one another'.⁵⁹² This demand is for a leap of faith towards which the closest Derrida was prepared to fly was by offering the aporetic gesture of a single word: 'perhaps'. Whether or not Derrida is correct in theory, however, it is impossible to imagine a revolutionary practice (nor even a radical pedagogy) which refuses to make a decision in the face of this aporia. We should remember, that said, that Derrida always insisted that 'the impossible must be done' and, therefore, one can – perhaps – retain a revolutionary consequence from deconstruction through a sleight of hand which we might describe as a traversal of the impossible. Certainly,

⁵⁹¹ Ibid, emphasis added.

⁵⁹² Ibid, p.310.

at least, Derrida agreed with Levinas that the other demands a decision from the same. Nevertheless, I feel that deconstruction is somewhat limited in its efficacy for revolutionary struggle, precisely because it seems to indicate that novelty can and always does arrive everywhere, in every 'reading'. As Derrida puts it, 'the fact that the present is new would be enough to change everything': the problem with this idea, though, is that everything in the capitalist West seems to keep on staying the same, at the level of political economy at least.⁵⁹³

Coming back once again to Hallward's question to the thinking of Badiou regarding the way that 'what is present relates to what is represented', Derrida's answer would always be that what is supposedly 'present' is in fact always already a representation. This does not mean, however, that what gets represented will return in some identical way: on the contrary, 'iteration alters' and, consequent to this alteration, 'something new takes place'.⁵⁹⁴ The trouble is, from a political point of view, that this 'something new' never seems to be properly differentiated from a more revolutionary novelty: the Russian Revolution and the toast popping out of the machine; both are something new, yet surely we feel one is rather more important than the other, in practice? Derrida, as I have said, may be correct in theory; but a smoothing over of all events, such that none is any more radical than any other, could hardly be in keeping with 'lived experience' (as they say) in which some events are very much perceived as being more important than others. It is here, I feel, that Badiou's intervention in to the general trajectory of the French philosophy of the last fifty years or so has been valuable. The trouble, however, as I have attempted to show in this chapter, is that the Badiouian conception of 'event' is presented in such a way as to over-emphasise the

⁵⁹³ Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p.70.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp.69-70.

politics of novelty (particularly with regards to aesthetics in general and, more specifically, music) within his conception of what character and substance the event could have.

Chapter Conclusion

According to Derrida, ‘reading... must give itself up to the uniqueness’ of the literary work; however, ‘for this rendering, you have to sign in your turn, write something else... irreducible, irreplaceable, “new”’.⁵⁹⁵ For Badiou, this Barthesian idea of reader as signatory/writer will be unacceptable: particularly if, as Derrida clearly implies with his ‘must’, this signing occurs with every reading, rendering every reading as a ‘new’ one. For Derrida, then, events are always happening all the time. For Badiou, by contrast, the event is a rarity. The problem with the former’s thinking is that the event gets dispersed to the point of disappearance (if everything is an event then nothing is). The problem with the latter’s argument is that the insistence on novelty arriving from the void is unconvincing, falling into something very much like elitism at times and often risking negativity in the face of actual mass pressure for change (see comments from Hutnyk quoted above).

The greatest problem with Badiou’s writings, for the purposes of the present text at least, is the dismissive attitude he takes towards popular music. Could there be such a thing as a ‘popular music event’, in Badiou’s eyes? I would think otherwise, and I hope that the quotations discussed above indicate why. Like Adorno before him, he seems to feel that popular music can do nothing other than reinforce the capitalist status quo. However, I want to argue that popular music can do a bit more than this: it can, for example, raise funds for the left, raise political consciousness amongst the masses, demonstrate less-hierarchical and more cooperative ways of working and being, and so forth. I would not pretend that popular music

⁵⁹⁵ Quoted in Norris, *Derrida*, p.76.

always manages to accomplish such achievements (clearly it often does not). I would insist, though, that this music has more potential value than Badiou credits it for.

I would also argue that popular music demonstrates that a facile equation of quality/importance with novelty will always be erroneous. Yes, much of this music is repetitious, in both intra-musical (repeating riffs and so on) and inter-musical (standardisation) terms. So what, though? In order to show that repetition is necessarily a problem in music/art, I would think that the critique would need to show that a music or artform could exist which is entirely free of repetition. Granted some have written as if such a thing is possible: we can note, for example, Luhmann's call for an 'innovation [which] is based on rejecting all previous criteria'. Whose music, though, has accomplished such a rejection? Certainly not Schoenberg, who was trained in traditional compositional practices and, furthermore, was greatly inspired by tonal, classical music.

If popular music *can* retain some eventfulness without ostentatious novelty, what would we be seeing? We would, I think, at least potentially be confronted with each other. What I mean by this is that popular music is the music which is widely popular (hence the name, obviously) but the stuff which really draws a crowd in any given moment tends to be the novel stuff: ragtime in the 1890s and 1900s, rock'n'roll in the 1950s, grime (in the UK, at least) in the 2000s, to select just three examples. But what happens when the possibility for and/or the desire for novelty dries up? In the next chapter I want to explore the possibility that something like this is developing around us at the present time. Rather than being cause for hand-wringing concerns about the postmodern condition or some such dilemma, however, I want to argue that, when we make music for and with each other, a new way of being together perhaps becomes thinkable. This new way of being, in short, would be a recognition of subtle difference and a respect for the other's creative potential even if this other is not creating outputs which are likely to inspire a generation or some such thing. At best, at

present, I would think this might be little more than the glimpse of something which could flower more fully in the future. What I do want to suggest, though, is that popular music (whether or not Badiou and his followers rate it) could perhaps kindle a vision of a radically different future – but a vision which is not contingent upon aesthetic novelty for its radical status. It is to the question of this possibility that I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: What's Left for the Future of Pop?

In a capitalist system, those who lack the means of production will not suddenly stop desiring social change simply because there has been a lack of novel aesthetic elements within popular music, nor within any other branch of cultural life. The idea is preposterous, I would assert: it is the failings and internal contradictions of a capitalist system, not radical aesthetics, which kindle the demand for social transformation. What popular music and other cultural/artistic elements probably can do, that said, is to contribute to the sensibilities and desires which can encourage radical mindedness or radical agency or, conversely, might encourage an acquiescent acceptance of capitalism as the only game in town.

A key question for left-orientated practitioners of popular music, therefore, will be as to how to discourage acquiescence amongst audiences and, instead, how best to encourage a certain consciousness and perhaps even a radical agency amongst the listenership. For our purposes, the further question is as to the aesthetic component of would-be radical music, now and in the immediate future: should it be radically novel or can it be comfortable as regards tradition without becoming complacent about the social situation? As already shown, there is a significant body of contemporary thought which would dogmatically link radical art to radical politics, as if one cannot have the one without the other. Certain thinkers, however, have resisted such an assumption or have at least queried it, as we have seen.

Overall, the history of popular music, at least since the mid-to-late nineteenth century, has included many instances where a new musical element or form has seemed to give voice to a certain political consciousness or to encourage active resistance. We saw, for example, that music hall songs (to at least some extent) gave voice to the industrial proletariat of the period in a manner which was aesthetically novel in important ways. We know, furthermore, that a range of singers and songs inspired a good amount of protest and demands for change in the sixties, with music which was often quite distinctly new in its sound. Novel musicality combined with significant demands for change was also a cornerstone of the seventies punk scene, with left-orientated sentiments often allied to novel forms of punk during the decades which followed. However, the novelty of such music was delivered in a recognisable context, with a great deal of inheritance from pre-existing traditions, begging a query as to how important the aesthetic novelty was as an encourager of radical thought or action amongst audiences. We can also note that the capitalist system remains intact, with the peaks and troughs of the left in Europe and North America, at least, not necessarily mapping on to the moments of aesthetic experimentation. (For example, the great clash of ideologies which peaked in the 1930s and 1940s corresponds to a time in which popular music tended most strongly towards standardisation.)

Do left-leaning producers of popular music need to find a new musical style in order to best push for social change? To approach this question from a contemporary and forward-looking perspective we need to consider the actual field of play since roughly the turn of the twenty first century. What's going on? Clearly quite a bit: war and 'terrorism', rioting, the banks in crisis, an increasing need for food banks in the West, the on-going march of neoliberalism. Should 'pop' musicians find an aesthetically new way to express anti-capitalist sentiments, then? Or, alternatively, should we insist that 'We Shall Overcome' gets dusted down and widely sung again, whilst nobody worries (least of all the young) about offering a new voice

in response to the pressures of the day? Neither of these options seems quite convincing, on my view. A radical new pop? One can already feel the breath upon one's neck from a mass of ageing punks and hippies insisting that there is no comparison between the new stuff and their glory days. And yet blankly reproducing the anthems of a previous era would be difficult to applaud: can we really say that nothing has changed between then and our now? Either way, the message feels much the same: it's all over, bar some muted shouting, many seem to feel.

Consider, for example, a recent debate on music and protest chaired by Caspar Melville and featuring journalist Tanya Gold, Crass drummer Penny Rimbaud, filmmaker Julien Temple and Jesus and Mary Chain drummer John Moore.⁵⁹⁶ Held at Hay on Wye in 2014, John Moore set the tone with his complaint that 'Rock'n'roll has been dying for quite a long time. It's been losing its potency, it's been losing its force, it's been losing its subject matter.' On Moore's view, 'It seems to be made these days by public school boys as a gap year between school and going into the city... Mumford and Sons, for instance... Coldplay, UKIP...'. Sleaford Mods are the great white hope, he asserts, but aside from that, 'we are in a horrible time'. Penny Rimbaud gets rather close to the heart of the matter: 'All pop music is political – it's just politics that we don't agree with. ... Abba was the most political band in the world: "Money, Money, Money", great, yeah, and they proved the point; that was their politics'. He raises an interesting question, for our purposes, as to the relationship between aesthetics and politics: 'Frankly, most leftist bands who've set out to promote leftist ideas are boring as fuck because there's no joy in it – quite apart from the, sort of, political aspects which is another debate entirely...' ('Revolutionary intent can come from anywhere – it's certainly not something that's exclusive to music, very far from it', Rimbaud adds; 'are we looking at the

⁵⁹⁶ Thanks to Matt Grimes for providing an audio recording of this event from which all quotations are sourced.

radical possibilities *within* music? Well, you've probably got the wrong panel...') Tanya Gold, however, makes the most revealing proposals, I would argue: 'It's perfectly obvious that protest music can go mainstream and can really change things as before [sic] the Vietnam War'; pop music 'can be revolutionary but... today it just seems yet another, y'know, depressing sign of hyper-capitalism', she insists. Gold wants to ask 'why was it that the sixties brought us the greatest music that the world has ever seen?' and complains that 'we have these very moneytised [sic] boy bands [who] wanna have really big houses, I mean, it's a long way from Bob Dylan...'

In truth, however, a measurement of the girth of Dylan's houses relative to that of some young 'moneytised' boy band would probably not support Gold's argument. In any case, it is difficult not to yawn when a middle-aged journalist compares the popular music of the twenty first century unfavourably with the 'greats' of yesteryear. This issue is not lost on the audience, indeed, with a pertinent query coming from the floor as to why it had not been possible to have 'someone like a grime artist on the stage' given the importance of this music to young people. 'That is a revolutionary voice right now, but yet it's been skated over [today]'. Caspar Mellville, in the chair, asks 'In what way is grime revolutionary?', eliciting the response that 'It's giving a voice in a mainstream way, using new media... There are hordes of young people talking about the way they're feeling'. Another voice from the floor suggests that 'there is revolutionary music out there but it's happening in a place where the people that are making this music don't want to engage with the music industry, they don't want it to be taken over, diluted.' According to this responder, such music makers have 'seen from the sixties and the seventies that as soon as the political economy of the music industry gets a hold of it, [the industry] just fucks everyone over'.

The analysis is astute, I feel. The panellists (in their forties, fifties and sixties) generally seem to believe that the sixties and seventies were a golden age for revolutionary pop despite the

complicating lack of any actual revolution in the West during those decades. The younger but anonymous voices from the floor are suggesting that serious mistakes were made forty or fifty years ago by popular music practitioners and must be learned from today. Radically-orientated musicians today, the respondent seems to be saying, must turn their back on the industry and learn from past mistakes – but he says little or nothing as to whether the music today should sound akin to popular music from the past or, alternatively, whether it should point to a radical new future via a radical new aesthetic.

Which is it to be? In the first section below I try to get the measure of the level of novelty in the music produced by a range of twenty first century music makers with a fairly ‘mainstream’ profile, exploring the extent to which the level of novelty would seem to correspond to the possibility for political efficacy for the left. In the second section I examine the limitations of a marriage between political sentiments/aspirations and popular music through discussion of some entrenched issues within the punk underground scene. Can the political engagement, towards which the punk underground has often aspired, be maintained without a marked novelty coming in to view? That is the crucial question for the second section. In the third section I turn to the complaints that popular music, in the twenty first century, has run out of steam. Finally I explore the question as to how different it could all be, come the glorious day; ‘blue skies thinking’, perhaps, but I make no apologies for directing my mind towards the possibility of an end to capitalism/neo-liberalism in the West and everywhere.

Before moving on, I want to consider some comments from Julien Temple made within the panel discussion mentioned above. ‘I think the Pistols were people who were committed’, he proclaims. ‘What were they committed to, though?’, Caspar Melville fires back. ‘To hearing their voice heard [sic]; to being able to ... stand up and say what they felt’, Temple replies. Having one’s voice heard is important, of course. The question, though, is whether a voice

such as that of the Pistols still needs the chance to ‘stand up and say what they felt’ in the twenty first century: perhaps, alternatively, we should listen more closely to the voices of those who are well under the age of sixty?

For Temple, the sixties brought ‘an understanding that you could change things. Music told you how to do that, it didn’t have to be words – it could be Dave Davies’s guitar solo on “You Really Got Me”.’ What, though, can a guitar solo *really* tell you? Let us assume that the guitar solo in question was intended to tell the audience that it was possible to defeat war, poverty and internalised social programming (ideology). If so, a child of the twenty first century is more than entitled to complain that granddad’s generation failed to complete this task. On Temple’s view, popular music in the West today ‘is played out, it’s been done round and round, it’s not going to provide any new answers – to use music, you have to re-invent it’. Is this really so, though? Many players and songwriters will not agree, I am certain: Paul Weller, for example, has remarked that for young musicians ‘it is easier because it’s all brand new and fresh; even if it’s things that have gone before musically, they are still new to you’.⁵⁹⁷ Temple is convinced that ‘The music business... want to recycle these things that were coming out of a rebellious phase initially, whether it was punk or mod or all these things we’ve had in Britain.’ However, he contends, ‘it doesn’t work: it’s got to come out of the living community now and it’s got to be new and different to challenge anything.’

On my view, elements of Temple’s passion are quite laudable: he does well to ask, with regards to ‘the economic bullshit we’ve been going through’ in the last few years, ‘Why hasn’t music formed a critical mass in the way that it did possibly do in the punk time or in a similar situation?’ This, Temple suggests, would involve ‘headbutting the whole fucking

⁵⁹⁷ Quoted in Daniel Rachel, *Isle of Noises: Conversations with Great British Songwriters* (London: Picador, 2013), p.173.

system'. The question, though, is whether popular music really has 'got to be new and different to challenge anything'. Why? My plea, in the present book, is for those who cling to such a view to at least challenge themselves to justify this perceived necessity for novelty: if 'headbutting the whole fucking system' is what needs to be done, won't a whole generation need to work together to make this insurrection as effective as possible? I can think of no clear cut reason as to why the raising of a critical mass, which Temple states is indeed necessary, should best be served by ostentatious newness/difference: isn't the point, rather, to kindle solidarity, to raise funds for the left or to encourage a faith that change is soon going to come? For that cause, I can think of many would-be contributors in the popular music field of the present century, but I will readily admit that many of these are lacking in musical/aesthetic novelty. They exist, though, making music which does in fact speak to an audience; and it is to such practitioners that I now turn.

We Need a Little Shift On Over To The Left

The Beastie Boys' *To The 5 Boroughs*, issued in 2004, demonstrates an unmistakable commitment to the left.⁵⁹⁸ The band's sixth studio album, it sold in huge quantities and thus helped the group to maintain their long-held status as one of the biggest acts in the world. What is particularly interesting about the record, for our purposes, is that left-leaning sentiments abound on a record which many assigned as the band's return to 'old school hip hop' upon its release: in other words, this album appears to promote the left with a markedly backwards-facing aesthetic. To be more precise, the style of beats and overall production, the rapping techniques which are employed and the consistent feel of the album harks back to the 1980s. The Beastie Boys formed during that decade, of course, but had experimented with the hip hop form in numerous ways during the 1990s. Songs such as 'Sabotage' from their *III*

⁵⁹⁸ Beastie Boys, *To The 5 Boroughs* (Capitol, 2004)

Communication album (issued in 1994) blended hip hop elements with something of an ‘indie rock’ feel, thus recalling bands such as Rage Against the Machine in identifiable ways. Overall, the album blends funk, hardcore punk and even psychedelia with the hip hop elements with which the Beastie Boys, at that time, were more normally associated. In 1994, within the (grand?) narrative of pop/rock history, *Ill Communication* seemed rich in novelty. The overall feel of *To The 5 Boroughs*, by contrast, is significantly less modernistic; it was widely perceived, at the time, as a return to the band’s roots.

Despite the ‘old school’ retrospection of the musical aesthetic on *To The 5 Boroughs*, however, broadly leftist themes leap out from the majority of the songs. Lead track ‘Ch-Check It Out’, for example, suggests that someone called ‘money’ should ‘put that shit back on the shelf’ whilst another rapper instructs us, with a generous splash of idealism I would say, to ‘believe when I say I’m no better than you’. On track two, ‘Right Right Now Now’, one of the trio of rappers declares that he is ‘getting kind of tired’ of ‘the US attacking other nations’ (the second Gulf War being a then-recent attack which the lyricist undoubtedly has in mind). The same vocalist complains of a ‘false election’ which has ‘got me losing my patience’ (again the target should be obvious, given the 2004 context). Track four, ‘It Takes Time to Build’, also complains of ‘a president we didn’t elect’ and declares emphatically that ‘we need a little shift on over to the left’. Comparable sentiments are innumerable upon this LP. ‘All Lifestyles’ is a particularly unambiguous example: ‘we got to keep the party going on’, the chorus proposes, for ‘all lifestyles, shapes and forms’. The song (and the album overall, in both title and content) is addressed to the population of Manhattan and New York City in the wake of ‘9/11’, the War on Iraq and so forth: ‘all you gotta do is do your thing’, the Beastie Boys argue, in order to ‘spread love in society’. ‘Spazzes’ and ‘freaks’ who are all ‘unique’ are mentioned as individuals who should ‘go and do your thing’. The overall message of this song and, indeed, the whole album, I would argue, is that the whole

menagerie of social, sexual and sartorial variability for which NYC has been famous must not be tamed by the horrific event of 9/11 and the rise of a new right under Bush's presidency.

'We Got The', the album's closing track, could hardly be less ambiguous on this score. 'Who got the chance to make things right?', the rappers ask, before answering in the chorus that 'we got the power to make a difference' and to 'make a change'. The song asks for a 'military decline', less 'hate and violence' and more 'knowledge, power and wisdom'. As with 'All Lifestyles' there is a call to the bohemia of New York City, I would suggest, with a camp-sounding interpellation of 'ladies, fellas and everyone between'. The anti-military instruction is markedly direct: 'we can work, walk, march and protest'; 'never again should we use the A-bomb'; and, in the last analysis, the Beastie Boys declare that an 'international ban' upon 'all W.O.M.D.s' is required – 'a multilateral disarm', they clarify.

Are such sentiments significantly less 'political' than those one could find in popular music from the sixties and seventies, when punks and hippies so often railed against 'the bomb'? It would be a bold individual who would dare to answer this question affirmatively, I think: perhaps Crass's lyrics were more provocative, but one could hardly deny that the Beastie Boys, here, are broadly 'on the same page' as those Epping anarchists; Dylan's 'Masters of War', meanwhile, is in fact less specific as regards the atomic bomb. The Beastie Boys of *To The 5 Boroughs*, then, have a decidedly politically-orientated agenda – and yet the aesthetic is retrospective, lacking in strident novelty, aesthetically 'old school'. Does this render its message useless? I think not; but there may be an issue relating to successful pop musicians voicing familiar sentiments over familiar-sounding music, whilst the 'message' washes over the listener like water off a duck's back. I am not convinced, however, that such a thing is necessarily occurring in the example of the Beastie Boys.

There are numerous other songs and artists from the early ‘noughties’ which I could have mentioned here – the appearance of Faithless singing their song ‘Mass Destruction’ on British television show *Top of the Pops* springs to mind as a particularly startling example from 2004, and Eminem’s ‘Mosh’ is surely worthy of a mention. Let us move on, though, to a more recent example of strongly politicised popular music from the current century: The King Blues, whose single ‘Save the World, Get the Girl’ brought them a significantly sized audience from 2008 which they retained until their demise in 2012.⁵⁹⁹

‘Save the World, Get the Girl’ labels ‘going to war to prevent war’ as ‘the stupidest thing I ever heard’ of, but this song is not the most strident of the King Blues’ repertoire. ‘We Are Fucking Angry’ would be a possible contender for the latter appraisal, however.⁶⁰⁰ Taking aim at bankers, MPs, the rich, the riot police, the state and war, the song promises that ‘we ain’t gonna take this no more’ and proposes ‘flinging nunchuckas’. ‘Class war’, the vocalist adds, is ‘what we wear our hoods and our masks for’. In the end an international grouping of ‘students, workers and unemployed’ are encouraged to ‘unite and rise out of the slum’. Like the Beastie Boys, then, an unmistakeable commitment to the left is being offered – and yet the music is far from novel in its character. ‘We Are Fucking Angry’, for example, simply transposes the chromatically falling and rising notes from the beginning of Bikini Kill’s ‘Suck My Left One’ (G-F#-F-F#-G) up a fourth to a C position with a small change to the sequence (C-B-Bb-A-C). Such is an example of roughly the same notes arising in a punk-related context (which I would approximate as the King Blues’ context), but musically-informed readers (or most listeners to the actual song) will realise that the riff is, broadly speaking, a re-write of the *Batman* theme. The vocal inflections recall a considerable number

⁵⁹⁹ The King Blues, ‘Save The World, Get The Girl’, *Save The World, Get The Girl* (Field Recordings), 2008

⁶⁰⁰ The King Blues, ‘We Are Fucking Angry’, *Punk & Poetry* (Transmission), 2011

of punk singers, although to be fair there are also elements of the modern London accent (a dash, that is, of Afro-British speech in general and the grime style of rapping in particular). The section of the song which should either be interpreted as the chorus or as a pre-chorus modulates to the sub-dominant and then back to the tonic in a manner which recalls the twelve bar blues structure. Nothing here will much surprise anyone who has listened to a reasonably wide selection of the punk-related music of the last quarter of a century or so. One can say much the same of the music in 'Save the Girl, Get the Girl', although here the upbeat reggae-recalling musicality nods more strongly towards a ska-punk sound as exemplified by Operation Ivy, the early No Doubt and countless others. The I-vi-iii-IV harmony of the chorus is pleasing enough but very few listeners, other than those who are so young as to have not heard much music in their lives, could find 'Save the Girl' a modernistic or avant-garde piece. On the contrary, we have heard it before – but not in this particular moment (the twenty first century), from these individuals with this particular passion.

Another recent example selected almost at random: Kanye West's album *Yeezus*.⁶⁰¹ Here, we have an LP which is actually rather modernistic within the mainstream field but which, beyond the mainstream, is not especially remarkable in aesthetic terms. Take the opening seconds of the album: a distorted 'square synth' sound mutates wildly before a hypnotic dance groove emerges. This would be somewhat 'cutting edge' in the early 1990s – in 2013, however, it is a familiar sound to those who are enculturated to such music. Track two, 'Black Skinhead', is less retrogressive but is nevertheless steeped in pre-existing musical details (for example, the groove of the piece has a markedly 1970s-recalling dotted crotchet 'swing' rhythm). Lyrically, the piece is pre-occupied strongly with race-related issues: a 'black man with a white woman' means that 'they gonna come to kill King Kong', West

⁶⁰¹ Kanye West, *Yeezus* (Def Jam), 2013

reminds us. Class issues are also raised: 'Middle America packed in' in order 'to see me in my black skin'. In the face of 'that coon shit', the problem is that 'niggas ain't ready for action': clearly, then, West is hoping for a level of agency which his potential comrades are failing to summon up; a very familiar problem of the left, of course.

Kanye West's ideological position comes across most strongly, I feel, in the song 'New Slaves' (track four on the *Yeezus* album). In his opening lines, West mentions that his mother 'was raised in an era' in which 'clean water was only served to the fairer skin': a striking reminder of the recentness of severe race-based inequity within the USA. Interestingly, though, West goes on to lambast the current 'broke nigger racism' which is typified by the instruction 'don't touch anything in the store' as well as the 'rich nigger racism' which says 'come in, please buy more'. Either way, he complains, 'all you blacks want all the same things' such as 'a Bentley, fur coat and diamond chain'. Invoking Billie Holliday's 'Strange Fruit', he mentions 'blood on the leaves' as he asserts that 'we the new slaves': the implication, I think, is that too little has changed in the present relative to the horrors of the (relatively recent) past. This alone would be politically interesting, coming from one of the biggest stars of the contemporary moment. The fact that West goes on to complain of a 'New World Order' and to identify, with admirable precision, that the detainees within a 'privately-owned prison' are tantamount to being 'new slaves', however, places the political rhetoric of this song on a comparable footing to many of the 'greats' of left-orientated twentieth century popular music. None of the sentiments voiced here (aside from the distasteful sexism which is regrettably rife within West's work) are a long distance from those one might hear from Phil Ochs, the Clash, the Last Poets, Chuck D, Conflict, Buffy Saint Marie or Billy Bragg. The critique, in other words, is part of a tradition, broadly speaking; a song like KRS One's 'Black Cop' is very much a precedent for West's critique here, for example.

In a way, though, that is the problem: popular music has often criticised racism and consumerism and war and so on, and such criticism has been common for many decades. Isn't it a problem, then, when the left repeats again the methods which thus far have failed to yield the required result? And isn't it particularly problematic when the music is familiar, unshocking and thus arguably somewhat comforting, given that the lyrical message is demanding (or at least implying a need for) dramatic social change? Kanye West's music isn't all that comfortable, granted, and may well have opened the minds of many listeners in both musical and political terms. Having said that, this music isn't radically new for the well-informed listener in terms of either the musical medium or the politically-orientated message: we've heard it before, roughly speaking.

On my view, this fact does not preclude West's songs from having power and importance, however. This is not to say that a song like 'New Slaves' will cause the US government to, say, nationalise the prison 'industry' (what other word can we use when the prison is privately owned?). It is reasonable, though, to assume that some will hear West's sentiment on the matter at hand and be nudged into a new way of thinking of issues around private finance, incarceration and the 'race' of the bulk of the US prison population (African American). It seems particularly likely that this will happen given that Kanye West is very popular with younger people at the present time and, needless to say, the young are less likely to have developed a radical critique of 'the system' (as many put it). Sexism aside, then, West is to be applauded for many of the analyses he offers on the *Yeezus* album. It might be that his critique would be more convincing for certain listeners if it were more musically novel, but this does not preclude the possibility that many will find his ideas challenging and perhaps transformative in terms of their conscious apprehension of the present ideological state of the Western world.

Like Kanye West, one could complain that Hacktivist's 'Elevate' repeats again what's already been said.⁶⁰² We find, here, constant complaints about the system which recall the anarcho-punk scene of the late seventies and early eighties, for example. Anarcho-punk influenced many individuals within their own lives, but it left the system against which it railed largely unmolested. Can we expect similar results from Hacktivist? It would take a wildly optimistic commentator to propose that such bands will do more for the revolutionary left than the likes of Crass *et al* did; repetition of anarchistic and left-orientated sentiments alongside instances of revelation amongst individuals, then, might be the best we can hope for in the twenty first century.

A song like 'Elevate' is interesting, though, with its call to 'take down who's in power' and 'fight fire with fire': the song at least demonstrates that young people are searching for radical and provocative solutions. Can we fight fire with fire? The Black Panthers of the later sixties clearly thought so, although many histories of the period suggest that their efforts were often counter-productive for the left. Can we 'take down... power'? Not from a Foucauldian perspective, for power ripples through all sociality: don't we speak of 'powerful music', for example? It would be hard to wish for a powerless music, no matter how anarchistic one's principles might be. That said, the group are clearly conscious that 'things ain't gonna change in a matter of hours', as they sing in 'Elevate'. To my ears, the message of this song is a serious one – and one which, despite mixing and matching pre-existing elements (metal and rap, most obviously), does not sound quite like anything which has preceded it. No-one could claim that this music has come from nowhere, however, nor could one easily imagine Hacktivist spearheading a new left-orientated mass movement within popular music, let alone beyond the pop field. What they could do, that said, is contribute to a critical mass, within the

⁶⁰² Hacktivist, 'Elevate', *Hacktivist* (Wake To Reality), 2013

West at least, demanding change. Would this count for something? Some will laugh up their sleeves at such efforts from young people to push for change, doubtless, but I would argue that in fact such a push *is* significant – and my impression of the contemporary popular music field is that there are more impassioned pleas for change from young singers and bands all the time.

With two UK top ten albums to their name, Enter Shikari are certainly a popular band despite making music which, by mainstream standards, has often been fairly marginal in aesthetic terms. Since issuing their debut album in 2007, Enter Shikari have meshed together elements of math rock, rap, EDM, tech metal and hardcore punk; just as importantly, for our purposes at least, they have often shown an interest in political matters. Take a song like ‘Juggernauts’ from their second album *Common Dreads*: the lyrics complain of ‘constantly relying on consuming to feel content’ and speak of a juggernaut which, on my reading at least, is an obvious metaphor for capitalism and the environmental destruction which that system is bringing.⁶⁰³ In the face of this juggernaut, the song encourages us to ‘clench fists’ and ‘step out’ in its path in order to ‘stare it right in the face’ and declare ‘thou shall not pass’. We are encouraged to believe that, at present, ‘we’ve still got time’ to make such an interruption of the juggernaut’s destructive progress (it is ‘crushing all in its path’, the lyrics tell us). If we don’t do this, however, ‘the idea of community’ which, presumably, is contrary to the juggernaut, ‘will be something displayed at a museum’. This is one example of such sentiments from Enter Shikari, but their catalogue includes numerous other examples.

Another case of impassioned demands within the broad field of popular music is provided by the band Against Me! Hailing from Gainesville, Florida, the band have shown a commitment to anarchism and the left for nearly twenty years. After signing to Sire records in 2007,

⁶⁰³ Enter Shikari, ‘Juggernauts’, *Common Dreads* (Ambush Reality), 2009

Against Me! released the very successful but musically and politically unremarkable single ‘Thrash Unreal’.⁶⁰⁴ Somewhat less successful, but nevertheless interesting for our purposes, is another single from the same album (*New Wave*) entitled ‘White People for Peace’. The title alone (the group themselves are all white) hints that Against Me! may have grown cynical about the potential for popular music with a left-leaning agenda to significantly intervene in mainstream political machinations. The lyrical message is fairly clear: ‘protest songs’ can be heard ‘in a response to military aggression’ and these songs can ‘try and stop the soldiers’ gun’; in the end, though, ‘the battle rages on’. The musical sound is very familiar: a chorus based on C minor to Ab to Eb to Bb is accompanied by a vocal style which doesn’t recall a specific singer and yet seems to connote a whole assemblage of punk and post-punk vocalist from the last thirty years or so. A more recent single, ‘I Was a Teenage Anarchist’, makes it more clear that Against Me! have shifted their politics somewhat away from the sentiments and aspirations they espoused in the years before they signed to a major label: ‘the scene got too rigid’, we are informed, and a ‘mob mentality’ turned against the band (due to the deal with Epic, one supposes). In the end, we are told that ‘the revolution was a lie’, with the vocal emphatically resting on the dominant note before the song, in a completely predictable fashion, returns to its tonic position for a repeating chorus to fade.

Perhaps, then, musicking is simply the wrong mode for politicking: perhaps, that is, the likes of the younger Against Me! were just kidding themselves that their music could contribute to changing the world, and instead we should all just be content with anthemic but predictable rock music. On this score, we can note with interest that Penny Rimbaud, in the panel discussion discussed at the top of the present chapter, even dares to propose that music is not

⁶⁰⁴ Against Me!, ‘Thrash Unreal’, *New Wave* (Sire), 2007

‘a particularly potent medium’ for political purposes; ‘I think that’s to exaggerate its value, actually’, he concludes with characteristic awkwardness given the context.

What should the Beastie Boys, Kanye West, Faithless, Eminem, Hacktivist, Enter Shikari, the King Blues and comparably ‘critical’ mainstream pop musicians do, then? Drop the clear desire for social fairness, greater liberty and less violence from their agendas? Find some way to ‘reinvent the wheel’ such that a more novel sound accompanies some radically new political message, with music and sentiments which could never have been imagined before? I would happily listen to it, I will admit; but, that said, I would never dismiss music or left-leaning politics simply because the sound or sentiment is familiar: the question, for me, is always whether the music and politics seem to be *right*. On my view, then, there is a need to step back, as it were, from the matter at hand. Is this ‘just music’? Does popular music even have any political importance, beyond postures and poses? It is to these questions that I turn in the next section, centring largely on the example of the punk underground.

We Made It a Little Bit Better Than It Was

What is the political importance of music? One recent proposal has been made by Barry Shank in his monograph *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*.⁶⁰⁵ In this text, Shank takes a different tack from scholarly studies which have explored ‘the ways in which political actors used music to forward their goals’. Instead, Shank is interested in an ‘experience of musical beauty’ which, he argues, ‘confirms within its listeners the sense that this moment of listening has within it the promise of things being right, of pieces fitting together, of wholes emerging out of so much more than assembled riffs and rhythms’.⁶⁰⁶ The move is bold, I would say:

⁶⁰⁵ Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p.2.

‘Pop anthems... have the potential to evoke a new sense of the world’ and to generate ‘intimate publics’ within a deeply felt ‘moment of commonality’.⁶⁰⁷ The nuisance which arises from this new sense, however, is that the moment of commonality – if we accept that such a thing has truly arisen through music – is so fleeting. As Ingrid Monson has pointed out, there is a musical division of labour which necessitates ‘a difference between the feeling that getting into a groove can create... and the social organization of its production and circulation’ such that music, no matter how groovy it might feel, ‘cannot be presumed to be innocent of power’.⁶⁰⁸ Shank does not pretend otherwise: ‘there is no necessary political trajectory that results from musical listening’ and if ‘it does demand a deeper interrogative listening to any political claims made’, nevertheless ‘the political force of music stops at that point’.⁶⁰⁹

Is this the limit of music’s political potential (popular or otherwise), though? I would like to suggest otherwise: there is, I think, something about certain songs – Florence Reece’s ‘Which Side Are You On?’ springs to mind – which combines musicality with a certain political sentiment in such a way as to actually embolden listeners and/or participants in the musical moment to continue with the struggle. I am suggesting, in other words, that singing a song can keep an agent of the left going even in the coldest and hardest moment (a picket line, for example). This is not to say that Shank is completely wrong-headed in his argument that the moment of listening can encourage a sense of rightness amongst participants irrespective of any effort by music-makers to use music to ‘forward their goals’. It is just that the ‘new sense of the world’ will not amount to much if the structuring principle of that world’s order

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid, p.5.

⁶⁰⁸ Ingrid Monson, ‘Riffs, Repetition and Theories of Globalization’, *Ethnomusicology* 43/1 (1999), pp.31-65: 52.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid, p.260.

(capitalism, that is) remains the same. A ‘deeper interrogative listening’ is not, in fact, the limit of socio-political outcomes which can arise as a direct consequence of the performance of popular music. Consider, to pick an example almost at random, a demonstration in continental Europe which, I am informed by a participant within the protest, erupted into a full-scale riot (after a prolonged period of more peaceful protest within the demonstration) at the precise moment when Atari Teenage Riot’s ‘Start the Riot’ was played through loud speakers.⁶¹⁰ One can argue over the value to the left of rioting, of course; what is clear, though, is that this piece of music seems to have contained a political force which went beyond ‘interrogative listening’ and instead encouraged a form of agency which some will call direct action. Although I was not present at this particular demonstration, I have certainly seen music play a pivotal role in decisive moments within demonstrations – the Reclaim the Streets protests which were popular in the 1990s are an obvious example of such. We can note, on this topic, John Street’s remark that it is possible to ‘change the mood and tempo of demonstrations by altering rhythms’.⁶¹¹

If Shank is right that music has a special potential for kindling a ‘new sense of the world’, it is surely worth asking from whence does that potential spring? Interestingly, for our purposes, he does not insist on aesthetic novelty as a pre-condition for the political force in which he is interested: ‘Even if one truly reaches out for new sonic combinations, the listener cannot escape the structuring effects that previous listenings have had on one’s ability to hear the new’.⁶¹² In fact, ‘innocent listening, a listening which hears only the newness, is

⁶¹⁰ Atari Teenage Riot, ‘Start The Riot’, *Burn, Berlin, Burn!* (Grand Royale), 1997

⁶¹¹ John Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), p.158.

⁶¹² *Ibid*, p.8.

impossible'.⁶¹³ The trouble with his argument, however, is that the 'political force' about which he theorises would seem to be so widely distributed that, in the end, one gets the feeling that any music whatsoever could have this political force. It does not seem to worry Shank that a world beyond the aesthetic realm might be left untouched by the musical politics about which he theorises: 'The political community which emerges from the experience of musical beauty might not be open to new relations' and there is 'no guarantee of a positive political outcome'.⁶¹⁴

Quite so, of course: there is no guarantee of such an outcome and the feeling of communal empowerment and rightness (righteousness?) which left-orientated popular music events might seem to be able to kindle is arguably nebulous in its status. What is worth remembering, though, is that musical events can raise funds for the left (cash for protest being a practical necessity for the left until 'the glorious day', of course) and can demonstrate, through the numeric value of 'people power', a popular commitment to specific causes and/or refusals ('protests'). Such is not quite what Shank has in mind when he speaks of 'political force', as we have seen, but for our purposes such possibilities are worth considering.

If funds and quantities of people are the measure of a political force which ranges beyond aesthetics, then, does it not follow that the most popular artist wields the greatest political force? Such an argument is problematic precisely because, on the one hand, funds alone cannot ensure revolutionary change. (Indeed, there comes a point when a well-funded left is merely attempting to fight fire with fire, if and when availability of cash becomes the core requirement; numerous discussions I have held with highly active protestors of many

⁶¹³ Ibid.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid, pp.260-1.

different types suggest that a willingness to actively demonstrate will always be preferred over and above donations or offers of fund-raising.) On the other hand, we have seen in the twenty first century that exceptionally large-scale mass mobilisation of individuals within a ‘peaceful protest’ context can nevertheless fail to halt a Governmental machine which, in the UK at least, seems capable of making world-changing decisions irrespective of popular opinion. (The protests against the invasion of Iraq in 2003 are only the most obvious recent examples.)

There can be a point, indeed, where rock/pop star appearances of philanthropy and consciousness-raising can become heavily critiqued by agents within the left. One thinks of the Chumbawamba’s album *Pictures of Starving Children Sell Records*, issued shortly after Bob Geldof’s 1985 ‘Live Aid’ event.⁶¹⁵ Chumbawamba, at that time, were very much part of the international underground of punk-affiliated indie music-makers which attempted to build a fairer music industry outside of the mainstream industry. Is the punk underground, which has long held a commitment to ‘DiY’ modes of independent production, a more effective tool for promotion of left-orientated ideals and aspirations as compared with the mainstream popular music world, then? As I indicated in *Anyone Can Do It*, I am not convinced that the DiY underground has all the answers: for one thing, there has been repeated re-inventions of punk-related music in the decades since the 1970s, often with an explicit left-leaning agenda. However, the ‘new-sense’ (as I called it), which appears to have arisen with each re-invention of the punk idea, has demonstrably failed to offer a nuisance to ‘the powers that be’ sufficient to halt the progress of neo-liberalism and capitalism.

That said, the basic antagonism remains in play in the twenty first century between the majors/mainstream and the bands which sign to major labels, on the one hand, and the DiY

⁶¹⁵ Chumbawamba, *Pictures of Starving Children Sell Records* (Agit Prop), 1986

underground bands which reject (through choice or necessity) the mainstream industry. We saw, for example, that Against Me!'s deal with Epic led to an underground 'mob mentality' (in the band's words) in opposition to them. The antipathy to the mainstream industry which many punk underground bands display may not be quite what it would claim to be. Bands such as Fugazi, who were actually offered major label deals but declined them, are the exception rather than the rule. Most punk-related bands will never gain the opportunity to put their (lack of) money where their mouths are. There are also good reasons to query the efficacy of a 'pure' underground which is untainted by mainstream capitalism, offering a utopian alternative completely separate from the capitalist world: how far from Disneyland is this utopia, really?

In order to attempt an answer to that question with direct reference to the punk underground scene, I want to examine the case of Ghost Mice, an anarchistic duo from Bloomington, Indiana who play what many call folk-punk and what some would call 'anti-folk'. Ghost Mice's song 'Up The Punx' (track six on 2004's *The Debt of the Dead* album issued on the band's own Plan-It-X label) is a powerful song which neatly sums up the punk underground dilemma.⁶¹⁶ 'What have we done?', the singer repeatedly asks; 'are we making any difference or just having fun?' A key lyrical question turns out to be whether punk is 'more than just music'. This is a question with a long history in punk, but Ghost Mice are understandably keen to point out that the punks 'have done a lot of things to improve community, like organising protests and serving Food Not Bombs' as well as 'sending books to all the prisoners' and 'throwing bricks through the windows of the evil corporate shops'. The song does not try to pretend that punks are the only people who have been 'standing up to the murdering racist cops', but it does encourage punks to be less self-critical. That said, Ghost

⁶¹⁶ Ghost Mice, 'Up The Punx', *The Debt of the Dead* (Plan-It-X), 2004.

Mice acknowledge that ‘we have our faults’. Given, however, that ‘punk rock music saved my life’ and that ‘we made it [the society, presumably] a little bit better than it was’, the song concludes by inviting the listener to sing along with the repeated refrain of ‘up the punx!’

The punk dilemma, then, is that the critical stance (which used to be also a frequently nihilistic stance, although this is less the case with twenty first century left-leaning punks like Ghost Mice) has to be turned inwardly as well as outwardly if it is to be anything more than a species of jingoism from an elite ‘club’. We have our faults, Ghost Mice therefore admit, but we made the world around us at least a little better, on balance. It is an honest assessment, I think, and an admirable one. Despite my general admiration for groups such as Ghost Mice, however, I feel that a still more self-critical examination of the punk attitude/‘philosophy’ could yield, in the end, a more radical ‘scene’ (as punks say).

With this aim in mind, I want to make some observations in relation to *Free Pizza For Life*, an auto-biographical book by Chris Clavin (vocalist of Ghost Mice).⁶¹⁷ For Clavin, music is important: ‘Music can permanently change a person’.⁶¹⁸ In keeping with the overall tendency within the traditions of punk which I described in my monograph *Anyone Can Do It*, he valorises the power of the new: discovering punk meant that ‘Every day was a new adventure, and every day we met more new people. Every new person introduced us to new music and new ideas. It was a flood.’⁶¹⁹ Punk begins again with Clavin and his generation, then, which is what punk always does: the longer tradition(s) of punk tend to be of interest to converts (‘when did you get into punk?’ is always a key question), but new generations

⁶¹⁷ Chris Clavin, *Free Pizza For Life: The Early Days of Plan-It-X Records* (Bloomington: Secret Sailor Books, 2012).

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.17.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.20.

typically get hooked, in the first instance at least, via a new sense which appears as a generational novelty. Clavin's Plan-It-X label has certainly gained an impressive reputation in the punk underground for issuing a range of folk-punk/anti-folk releases including, we can note with interest, *Against Me!*

A crucial ideal within Clavin's book, presented as having a somewhat political implication, is 'scamming', hence the book's title. Scamming, which is widely popular in the US and European punk scenes, is the use of cunning deception in order to gain free access to that for which one is normally expected to exchange cash. Before the mainstream arrival of the internet, for example, punks would routinely coat postage stamps with soap so that the stamp could be steamed off the envelope, wiped clean and re-used. Such would be a low-level example of scamming. Clavin and his friends seem to have developed a strategy to scam large quantities of pizza from a local shop without payment: 'We had free pizza for life', they believed. However, 'We had to protect our new pizza scam' because 'Anyone could do what we were doing, and if they did, we knew that eventually it would come to an end, so we didn't tell a soul.'⁶²⁰ This, I would argue, is the problem with the punk idea that 'anyone can do it' in a nutshell: it only works if a minority are doing the 'it' in question. Could everyone everywhere scam pizza all the time? Obviously not; the entire methodology is dependent on the wage system which scamming seems to pretend to having escaped. If everyone ('anyone') scammed for pizza, as Clavin admits, scamming would no longer be a possibility for anyone. Scamming, therefore, is a solution for the few; it has no universal applicability and, at best, is a provisional strategy which in practice is tied directly to 'the system' (as punks will call it).

⁶²⁰ Ibid, p.64.

To be fair, Clavin does admit that this broad problem made him feel ‘guilty’, despite the corporate nature of the pizza companies who were being scammed.⁶²¹ Interestingly, he suggests that he and his co-scammer ‘crossed a line’ and became ‘bad guys’ when they stole an unattended back pack, taking a check book and throwing the unknown person’s belongings into a bin.⁶²² The excuse, however, is predictable for punks, I think: ‘we considered most people to be our enemies’. Why the guilt, then? The best I can suggest, here, is that the reader makes up her/his own mind as to how radical scamming and theft from individuals is in the end. More important, for our purposes, is the way that this is all linked to punk, a subculture in which music holds a central position (‘music has been my life’, the author states⁶²³). On Clavin’s view, ‘The greatest thing about punk are [sic] the friendships it creates’.⁶²⁴ Is it not problematic, though, when these friendships are restricted to a ‘club’ (as Ghost Mice put it) with a special music taste? ‘We can all be free if we choose to, [but] most people don’t’, Clavin argues; but isn’t this an outrageously elementary (and obviously voluntarist, as a Marxist would say) analysis of a social system which, even in the USA and obviously elsewhere in the world, means that such a universally-available spontaneous ‘freedom’ is far from thinkable?

One thinks of Ginsberg’s famous opening line: ‘I saw the best minds of my generation of my generation destroyed by madness’. I critique Clavin for the letter of his text precisely because, in this author’s life, punks have tended to be some of the most exciting organic intellectuals I have encountered. In the end, though, I cannot accept the facile idea that ‘we’re

⁶²¹ Ibid, p.141.

⁶²² Ibid, p.144.

⁶²³ Ibid, p.108.

⁶²⁴ Ibid, p.101.

making the right choice, the rest are just too stupid to join us' (to paraphrase Clavin's formulation).

I have discussed Ghost Mice and their auto-critique 'Up The Punx!' because this is an area of popular music with clear (if sometimes questionable) political ideals and within which novelty is perceived to play an important role. As a cross reference against 'Up The Punx!', I could have directed the reader towards Bomb The Music Industry's '(Shut) Up The Punx' (2009) or, rather older but just as pertinent as regards the punk willingness to be self-critical, The Invalids' 'Punker Than Me' (1995).⁶²⁵ Crass's 'Punk Is Dead' (1978), indeed, is an early example along comparable lines. In the latter song, that said, it is the bands which collude with the industry (The Clash, who had signed to CBS, more specifically) which are being attacked rather than the 'punker-than-thou' types which consider themselves to be perfectly righteous.⁶²⁶ In fact, Crass paved the way for such types, probably (and probably unwittingly): both Bomb The Music Industry's and The Invalids' critiques suggest Crass as the band which the target of their critique would actually approve of ('he hates all the bands', to quote the Invalids, because 'only Crass is punk enough').

Clearly, then, many punk-related bands are willing to be self-critical, up to a point at least. More specifically, though, why is the anti-major label stance, which Crass and countless other punk and indie bands have adopted, an imperfect solution to the problem of the music industry? I have discussed this at some length in *Anyone Can Do It* but, in short, I would say that the problem is that capitalism obviously stretches far beyond the music scene; indeed, it

⁶²⁵ Bomb The Music Industry, '(Shut) Up The Punx', *Scrambles* (Asian Man), 2009; The Invalids' 'Punker Than Me' (Lookout), 1995

⁶²⁶ Crass, 'Punk Is Dead', *Feeding Of The Five Thousand* (Small Wonder), 1979

is the system which is all around us. This means that putting petrol in the van, buying food, selling records and so forth are a necessary link from the idealistic punk underground directly back to the capitalist economic situation which it would oppose.

Does this mean that young punk bands should just give up and go home? It is certainly hoped that this book will not discourage anyone anywhere from attempting to think of possibilities beyond capitalism. I would say, though, that using music alone as a tool to ‘fight the good fight’ (as many on the left will put it) is not enough even if and when that struggle includes an economically conscious element such as the attempt to maintain an independent alternative to the mainstream music industry. We need more. Does that mean that the ‘indie’ ideal is useless? Not at all: if it didn’t make the corporate industry uncomfortable, one would not find major labels attempting to hide their involvement with ‘schmindies’ (that is, corporately owned and/or distributed labels which present themselves as indie labels). Independence is not enough, though, in the end: a dependence on the capitalist superstructure will always return unless, as the Marxists will say, the economic base is transformed.

Can popular music help that change to come, though? I would say I am much in agreement with Kevin Dettmar on this question, who speaks of ‘the capacity of rock music... to do significant work’ but cautions that ‘the political rock artist always walks a razor’s edge’.⁶²⁷ On Dettmar’s view, ‘the great balancing act is to create thoughtful music that, rather than simply telling listeners what to think, creates a space in which its listeners can themselves think’.⁶²⁸ Can this be done if and when the music is lacking in musical innovation? I am convinced that it can, and I want to offer one example from the current UK punk underground scene which seems to me to have convincingly managed to create such a

⁶²⁷ Kevin J. H. Dettmar, *Entertainment!: 33 1/3* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p.45 and p.72.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid*, p.72.

listening space. Consequent to the success of their musical agency, I would suggest that the duo in question – Onsind from Durham, England – have shown that kindling/encouraging a desire for and confidence in the possibility of social change is possible *without* delivering a markedly novel musicality.

Formed around 2008 in Pity Me (the County Durham village from which both members of this relatively youthful duo hail), Onsind play a straightforward form of folk-punk comparable to many of the bands and soloists on Ghost Mice’s Plan-It-X label. Indeed, Onsind released their first album via Plan-It-X and have an ongoing close relationship with the US acoustic guitar-orientated twenty first century punk scene. Two albums have been released – *Dissatisfactions* (2010) and *Anaesthesiology* (2013) – in addition to a number of singles, split records and so forth.⁶²⁹ What is remarkable, for our purposes, is that they have a sizeable audience which sings along to their unambiguously left-leaning songs with highly evident passion. This is not so remarkable with a song like ‘Pokemon City Limits’ (lead track on the *Anaesthesiology* album), where the chorus is simple and easy to memorise, proposing that one should ‘never trust a Tory’ because ‘they’ll betray you when it matters’. It is both impressive and surprising, however, to stand near the front of an Onsind performance of a song like ‘God Hates Facts’ and to realise that the bulk of the bands’ followers have learnt every word of what is in fact a complex and fairly ‘wordy’ song. (The main songwriter in Onsind, Nathan Stephens-Griffin, holds a PhD at Durham University, it is worth noting.)

The music is powerful, then, tapping into a genuine ‘fanbase’ which takes the songs and the music very seriously despite minimal press coverage and the lack of a major label deal. My research into the status and renown of the group has indicated that a significant proportion of the audience are politically engaged; many of their admirers are participating in direct action,

⁶²⁹ Onsind, *Dissatisfactions*, (Discount Horse), 2010; Onsind, *Anaesthesiology*, (Discount Horse), 2013

indeed, as are the band themselves as far as I can tell. It was notable that an Onsind gig in Manchester which I attended in February 2015 offered, in addition to the more predictable merchandise of CDs and T-shirts, a large sheet of paper inviting audience members to write messages of solidarity and support for an activist who was doing time in prison for some unspecified reason. The band's more 'established' fans, as it were, include Billy Bragg, who invited Onsind to perform on a stage he curated at the UK's annual Glastonbury festival in 2013.

There is nothing all that new about Onsind's music, however. Take 'Heterosexuality Is A Construct' (lead track from *Dissatisfactions*), for example. Setting out from C minor, the harmonic sequence does feature an interesting (in a punk context, at least) appearance of G major sliding up to Ab major alongside a vocal glissando; this moment sounds a little like the Buzzcocks, to my ears, but is probably less harmonically adventurous than the older bands' best work. The musical effect of 'Heterosexuality...', overall, is very pleasing, but there is nothing here nor elsewhere in the song which is dramatically surprising in harmonic, melodic or lyrical terms. On the contrary, we've heard plenty of stuff like this in punk and in popular music overall plenty of times before; the vocal harmonies are well done, but they are not so surprising within the broader pop context.

Does this mean that Onsind don't stand out, though? Quite the contrary: as noted above, they have earned a committed following which only seems set to grow at present. On my view, their songs are highly inspiring; and attendance at numerous Onsind performances, sometimes with audiences numbering in the hundreds, has indicated to me that I am not alone in so thinking. 'The stronger a writer's ties with the cultural heritage of his nation, the more original his work will be', Lukács argued, whilst Connor called for 'the creation of a common frame of assent which alone can guarantee the continuation of a global diversity of voices' (see chapter four above). Is it too much to suggest that a group like Onsind have made

convincing steps in such directions? In a punk context, at least, this group is making music which, I have noticed, has earned assent from older as well as younger punks, often regardless of normal musical preferences (thus those who prefer hardcore and even ‘grindcore’ can be seen nodding along at Onsind performances). Many will say that the duo is markedly original even though it is hard to pinpoint a specific element of novelty in the music.

I am not convinced that the punk underground, and punk-related music more generally, has necessarily lost its political power, then. It may be that there are few aesthetically novel avenues which punk-related bands can explore at the present moment in time. As I suggested in *Anyone Can Do It*, punk has had many re-births and re-inventions and actually has no clear point of origin, but I would agree that there have been no obvious aesthetic radicalisations within this marginal field of popular music in the last few years. So what? Punk did not change the system when it was at its height of innovation. Why presume that more innovation would make a difference in the future, then? What punk is good at, it seems to me, is allowing musicians with rudimentary skills on instruments to make a sound which others enjoy. Onsind give me confidence that the punk scene will continue to throw forth music-makers who are full of character and who can offer a politically-engaged inspiration to others. Whether the music is identifiably novel seems to me to be a question of dubious relevance at best, at least from a politically conscious point of view.

Musicking In Days Like These

Make no mistake, the older generations are unimpressed with the youth of today. Not many commentators on twenty first century music are as long in the tooth as the late Eric Hobsbawm, but many complainants will share his view that music ‘has already been fundamentally revolutionised by electronics’ in the twentieth century, ‘which means that it is

already largely independent of the inventive talent and technical skill of the artistic individual'. Consequently, 'The music of the twenty-first century will be mainly produced, and will reach our ears, without much human input,' Hobsbawm contends.⁶³⁰ It is clear, in his writing, that he is something of a technophobe who worries about the 'recognisable and identifiable human creative products and their engulfment by technology and the all-embracing noise of the internet'.⁶³¹ This phobia leads to his dystopian vision for the future of music, although we can certainly challenge his argument fundamentally by pointing out that JS Bach's most important musical (and thus human and creative) achievement would have been impossible without the technological invention of a well-tempered clavier. The assumption of a dichotomy between human creativity, on the one hand, and technology, on the other hand, is a highly problematic and essentially erroneous one, then.

This is a shame as Hobsbawm actually gets very near to a democratised vision of the possible future of aesthetics. He asserts that 'it is impossible to deny that the real revolution in the twentieth-century arts was achieved not by the avant-gardes of modernism, but... by the combined logic of technology and the mass market, that is to say *the democratisation of aesthetic consumption*'.⁶³² For Hobsbawm, this democratisation cannot be a good thing, one assumes, on account of the role of the 'market'. In the final analysis, though, couldn't we have a democratisation of creative production/consumption in which local and perhaps unshocking creativity would nevertheless be valued highly by those in the moment? Such a possibility – a radical democratisation of creativity, unshackled from the market – is not

⁶³⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London: Little Brown, 2013), p.14.

⁶³¹ *Ibid*, p.6.

⁶³² *Ibid*, p.252, emphasis added.

raised by Hobsbawm. Instead he reiterates the old Adornian line: ‘The major charge against mass culture is that it creates a closed world, and in doing so removes that essential element in humanity, the desire for a perfect and good world – the great hope of man.’⁶³³ Perhaps so, of course; but what of the society which might exist *after* ‘the revolution’, about which Lukács (see chapter four above) and others have dared to theorise? In that moment, must we consume art which leads us towards this perfect and good world – or could it be that *we ourselves will continue leading ourselves in that direction?* This, I charge, is the possibility which Hobsbawm dares not consider in the twenty-first century.

We can hardly blame him, one might suppose; not many Marxist historians today can assemble a convincing narrative of the post-war era which would suggest that communist revolution remains imminent. Nevertheless, though, perhaps Marx was right – perhaps, that is, it is capitalism itself which will precipitate its own demise by dint of its own internal contradictions. From that point of view, there may never have been a riper moment for the left. What is crucial, above all, is that we do not repeat mistakes from the past. One such mistake, I would suggest, would be allowing ourselves to remain hamstrung by not only modernist naivety but also aestheticist presumption. A Marxist worthy of the name must assume that it is the proletariat (the only remaining class after the revolution, and thus the inaugurators of a classless society in the sense that ‘class’ presupposes more than one class, not only one class) which will develop an aesthetics for ‘a perfect and good world’. Why on earth would aesthetics be the same everywhere in a classless society? Perhaps, indeed, it is aesthetics itself (as traditionally conceived, and along with a whole lot more besides of course) which must be placed in to the dustbin of history ‘come the glorious day’.

⁶³³ Ibid, p.269.

I am confident that many will balk at such an argument, however. Will Self, to pick an example almost at random, has complained in *New Statesman* on the 15th September 2014 of ‘an assumed equivalence between all remotely creative forms of endeavour’ in the present era. ‘By providing even the most woefully untalented with an outlet for their “creativity”,’ Self rails, ‘the web has massively enlarged the numbers who style themselves as “artistic”, as well as increased the duration of their futile aspiration.’ Perhaps so; but one can’t help but wish that Mr. Self might permit those of us not quite as creatively and artistically gifted as he to be allowed at least some space for expressive opportunities in our lives. Just why is our aspiration futile?

I will return shortly to the question as to the possibility, now and in the future, for a radical democratisation of the possibility of artistic agency (the thing which Self fears, that is).

Firstly, though, I want to look at more general questions around the status of popular music in the twenty first century. I am much inclined to agree with Rupa Huq’s perception that there are many, today, who believe that ‘youth culture has imploded, courtesy of an unimaginative younger cohort labelled Generation X or the “slackers”’.⁶³⁴ I am even partly in agreement with Scott Plagenhoef’s idea that ‘Somewhere along the line, each genre [within post-war popular music] sort of stopped moving forward and the notion of progression became downplayed as a qualitative value’.⁶³⁵ It is true that there does not seem to have been as much development within genres nor formulation of popular and new hybrid genres in the twenty first century, although grime would seem a notable exception I would argue. Where I part company with Plagenhoef’s outlook, however, is his idea that ‘music has seemed to slip

⁶³⁴ Rupa Huq, *Beyond Subculture: Pop, Youth and Identity in a Postcolonial World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.4.

⁶³⁵ Scott Plagenhoef, *If You’re Feeling Sinister: 33 1/3* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p.51.

all too easily into the background of many kids' lives'.⁶³⁶ It seems to me, on the contrary, that popular music remains a topic of immense interest to young people. Indeed, ten years spent teaching music in a UK secondary school setting, in addition to my more recent university-based experiences of listening to young people talk about pop music (not to mention my role as a parent of teenage children), suggests to me that the young still take popular music very seriously in the twenty first century. I will admit, though, that the youth of today tend not to worry about the music's degree of novelty.

Plagenhoef's trajectory is worthy of our attention. For him, it is a problem that 'the mp3 gave listeners no album art, no liner notes, no photos – nothing but the music itself'.⁶³⁷ What is the problem here, though? Isn't 'the music itself' the point? Perhaps, in fact, Plagenhoef has unwittingly uncovered the central plank of the old and middle-aged's distaste for contemporary popular music: perhaps the problem is that the youth of today tend to listen to music as music, rather than as a pointer towards some utopia or alternative way things could be. Does this mean that contemporary popular music never deals in 'issues'? On the contrary, we have seen in the first section of the present chapter that at least some makers of popular music attempt to engage with politically-significant matters in their lyrics. It may be true that, even in these cases, the music ('the music itself') is generally taken as being 'just music' rather than as a likely signal of imminent revolution; but if we are losing 'mythmaking and magic', is that necessarily a problem?⁶³⁸ Presumably we don't actually want revolution to be only myth or trickery, after all. Plagenhoef argues that 'One's first records are often spoken of as mystical or magical things' whereby one might 'imagine your own parents being

⁶³⁶ Ibid, p.91.

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Ibid, p.92.

young'.⁶³⁹ Who does this speaking, though? For my part, my father happens to have been born in 1923 and, in my youth, he made it clear that he loathed everything which had happened in popular music from 1955 onwards. In short, I think that Plagenhoef is guilty of universalising experiences which, in fact, are a historically- and culturally-specific happenstance. My father may not have come of age in a household where recorded music was an affordable commodity, but this did not prevent him from becoming an active communist from the 1940s onwards. My son and daughters may be coming of age in a twenty first century where 'music simply hangs in the air like oxygen with nothing to tie it down', but I cannot accept for one second that the lack of a material object in order to convey this (actually immaterial) stuff called music is somehow leaving them with 'nothing to grab onto'.⁶⁴⁰ The music is there, it seems to me, whether we can physically grasp it or not (and obviously, in fact, we never have been able to and never will be able to, for sound is an illusion created by vibrating air molecules and thus has no materiality in a unitary sense). On my view, then, the hand-wringing which one encounters of late in regards to the tastes and listening habits of the young is badly misplaced. We can note, on this matter, that Andy Bennett has shown that young people today are using 'online digital media to interact with a range of different groups, "subculture" taking its place alongside "scene", "community" and a range of other descriptors as a means through which the young people [are] able to construct and present narratives of identity, belonging and lifestyle'.⁶⁴¹ Things are changing, then; and young people are using music in different ways. But then, the way popular music was used

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Andy Bennett, 'Youth Culture and the Internet: A Subcultural or Post-subcultural Phenomena? in the Subcultures Network, *Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp:89-101: 98.

for the forty or fifty years after Elvis released his debut single were markedly different from the way popular music had been used in the first half of the twentieth century. Whichever way one looks at it, the twentieth century completely failed to replace capitalism with an alternative system (or complex of systems): of that, at least, we can be certain. That given, why assume that a generation which is now old enough to, say, write for or be the editor of the *Guardian* newspaper has some special claim to having had a revolutionary youth? The future possibility for revolutionary change is where we need to concentrate our minds, I am more inclined to insist.

On this note, one might have hoped that Dorian Lynskey's lengthy history of protest songs *33 Revolutions Per Minute* might have pointed us in a positive direction. Regrettably, however, Lynskey begins by pretending that his first example, Billie Holiday's version of 'Strange Fruit', was *completely* discrete from the combination of popular music and politics which had existed prior to 1939: 'something *entirely* new'.⁶⁴² As noted in chapter one above, such claims about any singular piece of popular music are always easy to disprove for those who prefer facts over poetic fantasy. Indeed, it is telling that, over the page, Lynskey finds it necessary to admit that Leadbelly had written a harrowing song which gives account of appallingly racist mistreatment of African Americans one year in advance of 'Strange Fruit' ('Bourgeois Blues', 1938).⁶⁴³ He attempts to distinguish between the former from the latter on the grounds that 'Only a black man could have composed' a song like 'Bourgeois Blues' whereas 'Strange Fruit' was composed by a New York Jew.⁶⁴⁴ The reader will have to judge for themselves, in the end, whether this entitles Lynskey to claim the (actually very familiar,

⁶⁴² Lynskey, *33*, p.7, emphasis added.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

in structural terms) sixteen bar melody and standard jazz harmony of ‘Strange Fruit’ as being *entirely* new.

More important, for present purposes, are Lynskey’s ideas about the future of popular music. In his prologue, he admits that ‘newspaper articles had appeared with clockwork regularity asking where all the protest songs had gone’ during the first decade of the twenty first century; ‘I wrote a couple myself’, he admits.⁶⁴⁵ One such article, from which Lynskey quotes in a not entirely approving manner, asked ‘Are today’s artists just apathetic, or is the audience unreceptive to weighty words?’⁶⁴⁶ Lynskey does not concur: ‘many people wrote them, yet it seemed like nobody was. Instead of snowballing into a movement, myriad individual protest songs lay on the ground like flakes in a mild spring snowfall: frail, scattered, quick to melt away.’⁶⁴⁷ Readers inclined towards a postmodern lexicon might agree that the journalist is mourning the loss of grand narratives in pop music: his great concern is that no individual protest song was/is ‘genuinely huge’ in the twentieth century.⁶⁴⁸ To his credit, then, Lynskey admits that left-orientated popular songs *have* regularly been written in the current century (and it is worth noting that his examples are quite different from mine, suggesting that the overall field of left-leaning popular song is probably significantly broader still, given that the internet has made the margins of the field more difficult to track). His complaint, however, is that none amounted to ‘compelling art’.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid, p.xii.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid, p.667.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid, p.668.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid, p.xii.

What is compelling art, though? Personally, I find Kanye West's 'New Slaves' highly compelling; and it was unmistakable, on the occasions when I saw Onsiid perform, that a sizeable audience found their music compelling. Is there some generational chauvinism going on here, then? It is telling, I think, that the last sentence in the last entry within a chronological survey covering around seventy years of popular music's history complains of a 'spineless shrug of a record [which] was perhaps the protest song its listeners deserved'.⁶⁵⁰ Perhaps the put-down is directed only to those who listened to this particular record, just as a left-leaning reader might denigrate those who applaud Merle Haggard's most right wing protest songs. However, the positioning of the comment, alongside Lynskey's general outlook, leads one to wonder whether he thinks a whole generation have given a 'spineless shrug' in response to the need for social transformation. A clue is provided on this question, perhaps, in Lynskey's assertion that Bob Dylan was 'a young man who grew out of a need' in 1963; today, however, 'the need no longer seems to be there'.⁶⁵¹

This is nonsense. As we saw in chapter two, Dylan's contribution to the left was far from being universally applauded by activists in the sixties. By the opposite token, the fact that no individual 'artist' is being invested with heroic salience at the present time does not prove that there is no longer a need of and desire for change. I have shown above, and Lynskey himself admits furthermore, that left-orientated songs are being written today. The lack of 'inspirational individuals with the power to move mountains' amongst such songwriters does not prove a 'loss of faith in ideology'.⁶⁵² As much as anything, the fact that no individual rock or pop star is being proclaimed as a hero for the left today might simply demonstrate

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, p.680.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, p.681.

⁶⁵² Ibid, p.682.

that (to put it in terms with which Lynskey is doubtless familiar) we won't get fooled again.

In the end, after all, Dylan firmly distanced himself from the left: why search for a new individual to repeat the tragedy as farce, then?

On Lynskey's view, 'the discourse around politics and pop has become absurdly unforgiving' of late.⁶⁵³ It is hard to take such a complaint from a music journalist who himself admits to having contributed to the climate in question, however. Guiltier still, on this score, is Simon Reynolds, by whom many of Lynskey's complaints about contemporary popular music are reiterated and expanded. Like Lynskey, for example, Reynolds mistakenly thinks that music can be an object (hence his misplaced mourning for 'the Twilight of Music as an Object').⁶⁵⁴

Like Lynskey again, Reynolds is unimpressed with the popular music of the twenty first century (this is essentially the whole point of his book *Retromania*). For Reynolds, however, things are about as bad as they can get: 'retro' contemporary pop is 'lame and shameful', an embarrassing stain upon his generations' 'genius artists and masterpieces'.⁶⁵⁵

Is this fair complaint? Certainly some of the music which Reynolds would label as masterpieces by genius artists would not be accepted as such by many. Doubtless he is entitled to his own opinion, but there is little or no musicological grounding to many of his assertions. (Reynolds is a journalist, not a scholar, of course; indeed, he objects to an alleged 'left wing bias in academia' and would doubtless be unimpressed by the arguments of the present book, therefore.⁶⁵⁶ However, I have read undergraduate essays which erroneously

⁶⁵³ Ibid, p.684.

⁶⁵⁴ Reynolds, *Retromania*, p.86.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid, p.403.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid, p.314.

refer to ‘academics such as Simon Reynolds’ and, therefore, I think it is worth pointing out some of the largest errors in his writing.⁶⁵⁷)

Having said this, it is to Reynolds’ credit that he acknowledges ‘an argument that the linear model of progress is an ideological figment’ and that deployment of traditional modes of creativity could therefore be ‘a counterweight and a drag in the face of capitalism’s reckless and wrecking radicalism’.⁶⁵⁸ Relevantly enough to my trajectory in the present book, he adds that ‘In pop terms, this might translate into scepticism about the shock (of the new) doctrine, a suspicion that addiction to innovation might be as much of a problem, a distortion, as dependency on the past.’ This is Reynolds at his best, despite his immediate abdication of the realisation he has just made (‘as a died-in-the-wool [sic] modernist’, he prefers to admit to ‘biases’ than to pursue the logic he has just outlined so well).

If even Simon Reynolds, the greatest opponent of retrospection in popular music, can see that there might be reason to reject the call for radical aesthetics as a necessary correlate of the search for a radical (anti-capitalist) politics, it seems likely that the same thought has not escaped the youth of the day. Perhaps it is being done somewhat unwittingly, rather than as a conscious strategy, but the evidence is before our ears, as it were: the contemporary music-makers discussed so far within the present chapter are combining left-leaning sentiments with broadly familiar-sounding music. How radical, though, can popular music be, in political terms, when it falls shy of aesthetic novelty?

What we should immediately concede, on this question, is that it is a mistake (and perhaps was the post-war generations’ greatest error) to imagine that pop and rock would lead the

⁶⁵⁷ Chief amongst these, I think, is his misguided attempt to employ Derrida, as discussed in Dale, ‘Death’, 2013.

⁶⁵⁸ Reynolds, *Retromania*, p.404 for this and all subsequent quotes in the paragraph.

way in some revolutionary sense. This, I think, is (was) to place the cart before the horse. I am, in other words, much in agreement with Lukács when he says that in a post-revolutionary context ‘qualitatively new functions’ can be manifest despite content ‘which remains unchanged’ (see chapter four above). It is revolutionary social change which needs to precede popular music unleashing its greatest radical potential, perhaps. Is it not rather simple, though, to declare that, in the problem of the chicken and the egg, we can simply declare that the egg must come first? Some first principles of Marxism are worth bearing in mind, here: the precondition for revolutionary action is class consciousness, which will snowball into a critical mass and – end result – we get revolution everywhere and a classless society. The model seems to have been a bit too tidy, since the messy reality of the last hundred and fifty years did not actually function in such a neat manner. What we can take from the classical Marxist model, though, is the hope that conscious agency should beget further conscious agency.

Does this mean that we should hope for popular music with lyrics about, say, the class war in the hope that these lyrics will inspire consciousness amongst an audience and thus contribute to the building of a critical mass? I see no harm in such an effort, and I will admit to personally enjoying the explicitly Marxist pop music of Surrey’s Thee Faction. There is a definite left-leaning pop appeal to songs like ‘Deft Left’ and ‘Ready?’ from *Up The Workers! Or Capitalism Is Good For Corporations; That’s Why You’ve Been Told Socialism Is Bad All Your Life*.⁶⁵⁹ The latter song has a pre-chorus which suggests that ‘the beauty of Marx was he was talking 1850’, adding that the singer is also ‘talking swiftly’ (in other words, revolution is still imminent, presumably). I have not seen the band live, but I’m sure that the benefit gigs

⁶⁵⁹ Thee Faction, *Up The Workers! Or Capitalism Is Good For Corporations; That’s Why You’ve Been Told Socialism Is Bad All Your Life* (Soviet Beret), 2011

and consciousness-raising events which Thee Faction routinely play will greet such songs with enormous enthusiasm. Doubtless there is an argument to be made along the lines that lyrics such as ‘whose got all the best tunes? Jean-Paul Sartre and the Frankfurt school!’ (‘Deft Left’) are preaching to the converted: one probably only enjoys the lyric if one is already conscious of the leftists who are being name-dropped. A twelve bar blues entitled ‘Join The Party’ is not the most inspiring thing one can find in contemporary left-orientated popular music, furthermore. Nevertheless, there is every reason to think that an album like this, or like Darren Hayman’s *Chants For Socialists* (2015) or Grace Petrie and the Benefit Culture’s *Love Is My Rebellion* (2015), can raise the spirits of those who are still agitating for change along broadly traditional socialist lines.⁶⁶⁰

That said, it needs to be acknowledged that popular music with a radical agenda can potentially lead listeners to believe that simply listening to music is a radical act. One thinks of Billy Bragg’s complaint that ‘wearing badges is not enough’ in his song ‘Days Like These’. A less obvious example is provided by Morrissey in his *Autobiography*: in 1976, ‘I could accept all the suffering that came my way as long as the Ramones were in the world’.⁶⁶¹ Perhaps Adorno should turn in his grave: from a Marxist point of view, after all, we should not be acquiescent as regards the suffering which capitalism has brought to the world and we certainly should not use music as escapism. That said, it seems likely that Bragg’s numerous socialism-promoting songs have encouraged at least some listeners to get active whilst Morrissey’s vocal encouragement of vegetarianism has surely contributed to the vastly increased popularity of this dietary option since the Smiths issued *Meat Is Murder* in 1985.

⁶⁶⁰ Darren Hayman, *Chants For Socialists* (Where It’s At Is Where You Are), 2015

⁶⁶¹ Morrissey, *Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 2013), p.112.

It is fair to suggest, then, that popular music can do some work as, essentially, propaganda (in a non-pejorative sense). We can add that the visceral and aesthetic experience of popular music can have political implications if Middleton (see chapter four) and Shank (see above) are to be believed. I want to return now, however, to my suggestion that popular music might show its greatest political significance after social transformation has begun. Naturally this involves a degree of hypothesis, but I attempt to ground my comments in known facts.

Many practitioners of popular music and many fans care little about standardisation, repetition, musical simplicity and so forth: they just enjoy making and listening to the music, irrespective of whether it is clever, beautiful or innovative. Marx suggested in the *German Ideology* that, in a communist society, forms of labour would be variable from day to day and even within the course of a single day. Instead of being restricted to one form of specialised labour, one might thus hunt, fish, rear cattle and exercise one's mind in the course of a single day, according to Marx. Anarchists tend also to assume that freedom of agency is both possible and desirable. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that an availability of time might be more thinkable if a left-orientated revolutionary change were to be brought about in the future. We can also guess, furthermore, that many individuals in today's society might continue to enjoy making and listening to popular music if such a situation were to arise. In that case, would popular music – and, indeed, music in general – need to keep innovating and changing in order to hold our attention or deserve our enthusiasm?

Perhaps so; I am inclined to agree with the Marxist insistence that one cannot imagine what a socialist society would be like until it is a universal reality, and for this reason I consider it at least thinkable that music-making and music itself would look (or, rather, sound) very different 'come the glorious day'. It might be that 'musicking' (to use Christopher Small's term) would continue evolving alongside a society which, if Marx is to be believed, would allow genuine individuality to flourish. On the other hand, though, perhaps we would simply

have maintenance of musical traditions, including those which fall within the popular bracket, but with a radically different economy of musical learning and very different modes of musical presentation (a different basis for musicking, then, but using traditional modes, perhaps).

Who knows? Nobody does, as we have noted. What I think we can reasonably postulate, however, is that the system of stars – of ‘geniuses’, of ‘trailblazers’ and the whole lexicon which does so much to help sell music magazines and fill concert arenas and stadia – would have to shrink and fade. Is the loss of the opportunity to witness, say, Bob Dylan performing at Wembley Stadium too much to bear? Naturally the reader must decide for herself. Those who (like this author) feel that the loss would be worth the gain, however, should also consider the lionising of musicians which even occurs within the ostensibly egalitarian indie/punk underground scene(s). It is fair to guess that a socialist world or an anarchistic society would not encourage the valorisation of genius individuals such that they could be ‘rock stars’. Might this not mean that the micro-stars of the underground might also need to be jettisoned?

We are at an aporia, again. However, I want to suggest one possible and counter-intuitive benefit which might arise from, say, a social discouragement of the lionising of ‘great’ popular musicians even in a ‘cult’, micro-popular underground scene. For discursive purposes, I will take the example – selected almost at random – of Jeff Mangum, singer and songwriter of Neutral Milk Hotel. Kim Cooper has reported remarks from Jamey Higgins, the latter having met Mangum simply as a friend’s flatmate in a localised indie music scene before hearing any of Neutral Milk Hotel’s music. On hearing the sound, Higgins was ‘freaked out by how brilliant and different it was, but mostly by the realization that what we

hearing was done by this guy down the street who we had just met a few days before'.⁶⁶² Of critical importance, for our purposes, is Higgins admission that 'The next time I encountered Jeff Mangum, there was a reverence and nervous excitement that I could not disguise. He was changed to me as a person' and was no longer 'just this tall, kind of shy guy' amongst Higgins' local milieu.

Did Mangum's musical talent mean that he deserved to be thought of so differently? Perhaps not: Cooper reveals that 'this kind of reverent, awestruck attitude... would become such a burden to Jeff over the next couple of years' that he eventually gave up performing; 'being treated like a celebrity could be spooky and discomfiting'.⁶⁶³ The fact that the singer withdrew from public performance for many years doesn't prove anything, of course: he seems, on Cooper's account, to have suffered from nervous disorders of some kind and, therefore, perhaps stardom just wasn't suited to this one individual. Having said that, don't we often hear the famous complaining that success isn't as comfortable as it might appear? Don't we often hear popular music success stories claiming that the period just before they became established was more exciting than the period of reliable adulation? Speaking on BBC Radio 6's *The Story of Mogwai*, broadcast Sunday 8th February 2015, Stuart Braithwaite of cult indie band Mogwai stated that this was his experience of the 'amazingly exciting time' before full blown success had arrived. Braithwaite added, furthermore, that a music journalist associate of his had confirmed the same in regards to 'almost every band she ever speaks to'. 'It's not when they're selling out venues and headlining festivals', he concurs with his journalist friend; the 'best bit' is the initial success when 'sleeping on people's floors and putting out seven inch singles'. Why? Arguably, I would assert, because at that point

⁶⁶² Kim Cooper, *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea: 33 1/3* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p.46.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

relationships are less geared towards a star/fan (or star/employee, star/representative and so forth) structure.

It may be, then, that being a star musician is a form of specialised labour which we need not mourn should revolution arrive and rock stars become a thing of the past. I will offer no further speculation on this question in the present context except to say that my many years spent teaching music in an inner city secondary school facing severe socio-economic challenges left no doubt whatsoever in my mind that anyone can make a musical sound which will please others. We do not have to agree with Will Self, therefore, that creativity is a futile aspiration for those of us who just enjoy creating things: it may be that we have little or no chance of producing something of ‘lasting value’, but it seems to me, at least, that there are good reasons to demand creative space in our lives. What else, after all, is life for if not creativity of one kind or another?

Chapter Conclusion

In the 1964 film *A Hard Day's Night* (created, of course, to exploit the Beatles' burgeoning success) there is a sequence in which George Harrison stumbles in to the office of some kind of advertising man who is developing a campaign for a new design of shirt. Not realising that he has a popstar in his midst, the ad-man shows Harrison one of the shirts, the latter declaring ‘I wouldn't wear one of them, they're dead grotty’. (Those with a keen interest in popular culture might recognise this as the famous moment wherein the word ‘grotty’, which was invented for the screenplay, began its eventually successful journey to becoming part of vernacular speech.) Undeterred, the ad-man responds that this decision will soon result in him losing social popularity, but Harrison states that he doesn't care. Mildly irritated, the older man tells him that ‘the new thing is to care passionately and be right wing’.

The whole skit is set up to remind us that advertising agents can never fully control popular tastes, of course. What is also interesting, for our purposes, is that last quoted line: can the new thing be a right wing thing? The historical example of the Futurists shows us that it certainly can; indeed, the fact that National Socialism was popularised with a sharp taste for visual novelty is unmistakable (Hitler's remarkably innovative moustache, the leftwards-looking *Parteiadler* and so forth). Presumably the opposite also applies: old stuff can be valuable to the left; particularly if it is stuff which the revolutionary class (the proletariat, from a Marxist point of view at least) has invested importance in.

Popular music can be right wing, left wing and, sometimes, it can seem to be neutral. What is undeniable, though, is that it remains wildly popular not only with the working class in the West but also in the 'developing' countries of the East: for example, there are notable and growing punk scenes in Indonesia, China and even in the most remote parts of Russia. Why would Western popular music appeal in such a context? It is perceived as a way of demonstrating sophistication and some form of urbanity, perhaps; a comfortable component within the spread of neo-liberalism across the globe. Why punk, though? Perhaps, popular music (or at least some forms of it) actually offers a good vehicle for expressing a range of sentiments which we might want to encourage: dissent, a questioning attitude and/or a sense of empowerment, for example. Is this enough, on its own? Certainly not, from a left-leaning perspective: we need actual empowerment, not just a new sense of it; we need to actually ask explicit questions of the system, and demand answers; we need revolutionary social change, not only dissent.

I see no necessary reason why popular music could not contribute to the struggle for social change, however. Indeed, I think there is ample evidence that it has done so in a range of ways during the twentieth century: one need only glance through Dorian Lynskey's *33 Revolutions Per Minute* to see that such is the case. What is the prognosis for the future

contribution which popular music might make to such a cause? On Lynskey's view, things look unpromising, as we have seen. I would beg to differ, though: it seems to me that the demand for change is still burning brightly in the UK and across the globe. The key question for the present text is, does that mean that we need a radical novelty in popular music in order to kindle a radical change in society? On my view, there is no conclusive reason to suggest that such is the case. I do think, that said, that there are nuances to be added to such a rejection of what I call the politics of novelty. In the following conclusion to the book, I attempt to outline some of these nuances.

Conclusion

A radio interview with Philip Glass broadcast on Radio 4's *Today* programme, Thursday 10th Oct 2014, reflected a core element of the mind-set I have been critiquing in this book. The interviewer, John Humphrys, presumed that the following dichotomy was tenable: 'when you write music from now on, are you writing music to please the audience so that you will become even more popular, or are you writing music that you think may set new boundaries?' This popularity/novelty dichotomy is of highly dubious legitimacy. In fact, music which crosses standardised boundaries (such as that composed by Scott Joplin, to pick just one example which has been discussed in this book) is often wildly popular. In any case, 'music to please the audience' in academic composition contexts faces an institutional expectation to cross 'new boundaries': how else is the academic composer supposed to evidence their creation of 'new knowledge' and so forth? (The audience for this music is, as they say, rarefied; but if you want to please those that *are* listening, you'd better try to innovate.)

Even if we insist (*contra* Adorno, of course) that popular music is capable of evolving ('innovating') and crossing boundaries, however, we can still wonder whether the crossing of

the boundary is politically significant. In chapter one, I argued that popular music has no definite point of absolute origin and that its novel developments have emerged through evolution rather than unforeseeable flashes of novelty from nowhere. In the cases I explored (ragtime, music hall and rock'n'roll), however, it was acknowledged that *something* new was happening – but not something *entirely* new. Did audiences and music-makers find this new music empowering on some level? I suggested that they often did; but we must admit that the empowerment which was felt did not normally develop into, say, political agency in any clear and definite sense. Indeed, the cases of ragtime and music hall have shown that ‘new today, old tomorrow’ can be the ultimate fate for that which had seemed rich in novelty, with the music probably coming to seem symbolic of the bad old days for some. Fifties rock'n'roll seems to have fared rather better, interestingly, probably because it was explicitly drawn upon rather than reacted against by subsequent generations of musicians and listeners. However, few would try to pretend that rock'n'roll, at that time, moved far beyond symbolic rebellion.

What about the sixties? In chapter two we saw that numerous claims have been made for the sixties as a period in which pop and politics were so tightly entwined that disambiguation is barely possible. I made some efforts to explode this notion, partly by offering a disambiguation of my own (but which, as I acknowledged, is heavily inspired by the work of Rorabaugh and others) between an earlier and a later sixties. Several of the writers on whose work I drew in chapter two have assumed that developments in rock music in the later sixties were crucial causatives for the socio-political tumult which occurred in the West during that period. I queried this idea, suggesting that the common association between a song like the Rolling Stones’ ‘Street Fighting Man’ and the charged political atmosphere around 1968 is of a dubious legitimacy. In any case, I attempted to show that songs such as this and the Beatles’ ‘Revolution’ were novel in certain respects but were certainly not something entirely new. I

also suggested that the long sixties, which arguably runs from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, may have been a period of great socio-political change in the West but it certainly did not succeed in any attempt it may have made to displace the capitalist hegemony. For this reason, we need to learn not only from the successes of the sixties but also from its failings; we should not be looking back in envy, in the manner which some writers would seem to encourage us to do, but looking forwards in hope and determination.

The seventies punk movement seems to have looked back in anger more than envy, as I attempted to show in chapter three. Again, something identifiably new was occurring here, but it was not entirely new: indeed, as I argued here and in my monograph *Anyone Can Do It*, there are good reasons to see punk as a continuation from the counter-culture(s) of the sixties rather than being only an opposition to the ‘hippies’ and all that. One thing that punks and hippies certainly have in common is that neither era successfully threw the capitalist system all that far from its path: despite innumerable complaints in song about ‘the system’, the new fashion within popular music did not actually deliver a new society.

This problem led me to discuss, in a more theoretical mode, the question of the overall relationship between radical aesthetics and radical politics, in chapter four. I attempted to do this by exploring the ideas of the modernists of the early twentieth century and, in the second section of the chapter, the mid-century’s ‘late’ modernists. I argued, drawing on Michael North’s work as well as my own research, that the former group were less hysterically committed to radical novelty than many commentators have assumed. Rather, it is the late modernist era wherein a more marked faith in novelty as a marker of overall radicalism came to the fore. Elements of this can be recognised in developments in jazz from the 1950s onwards, but on balance popular music correlates rather awkwardly to the grand narrative of European art music. For example, it can be argued that popular music was and is always already postmodern in a certain sense: if high modernism was firmly orientated towards elite

culture, which most indeed agree it was, it is hard to see how popular music could ever have a high modernist moment and still remain *popular* music. In any case, I attempted a sympathetic discussion of postmodern theories but concluded that, if the commonly held view that postmodernism is limited in its political efficacy for the left, the paradigm becomes less viable for my project in the present book.

Having examined tensions between modernist and post-modernist outlooks in this way, I feel that it was natural to examine the influential contemporary philosophy of Alain Badiou in chapter five. Badiou, after all, has no truck with postmodernism and, as I attempted to show, has returned to a broadly modernistic way of thinking with his theory of the event. I feel that his ideas are consequently problematic: for example, his arguments on Schoenberg seem to disregard the debt which the composer himself admitted that he owed to tonal methods; Badiou's deployment of Rosen's ideas, meanwhile, is dubious at best. On the particular subject of popular music, I argued that Badiou's evident disrespect for this cultural quarter is far from even-handed and, moreover, seems to tell us more about the philosopher's personal opinion than it does about any musical logic. I presented Badiou as a firm advocate of a politics of novelty, overall. When considered in the context of other comparable thinkers, however, I argued that his position is often less helpful to the argument I am attempting to make in the present book.

In the last chapter I argued that a determined commitment to the left and/or radical social change can be identified within a range of examples of contemporary popular music from the mainstream or the peripheries of the mainstream. I pointed out that none of these was/is radically novel relative to the overall history of popular music, but I queried the idea that this limited their political value. I then explored some recent developments in the punk underground, critiquing some tendencies which seem to have repeated errors from the past (voluntarism and forms of elitism, for example, which were recognisable in the writings of

Chris Clavin from Ghost Mice). I offered a more positive summary of the politically-motivated efforts of contemporary folk-punk group Onsind, but observed that their music is far from innovative in any over-arching sense. In the final section of the chapter I presented some particular arguments from particular individuals which, in differing ways, have proposed that popular music has run out of steam, politically and/or aesthetically. I attempted to challenge such arguments but acknowledged that there are some difficulties around the potential of popular music as a contributor to the kind of social change of which the left has dreamed. However, I proposed that there is no compelling reason why novelty or a lack thereof should be a decisive factor with regards to these difficulties. Towards the end of the chapter I allowed myself some space to consider some possible implications for popular music should a radical social transformation occur. In particular, I suggested that we need not necessarily mourn the ‘star’ system should it fail to endure such a transformation. I also suggested (drawing on Lukács) that musical traditions, including those which form the backbone of this thing known as ‘popular music’, might take on new meanings in a post-revolutionary society but might, in themselves, retain a similar content to that which had been known in the pre-revolutionary society.

I have already come to a broad conclusion, then, that popular music does not need to be contingent on a politics of novelty in order to retain some political importance/potential. I want to nuance this claim here somewhat, however. The first thing I want to acknowledge, with something of an auto-deconstructive flourish, is that I noticed, when reviewing my comments on Thee Faction in the last chapter, that I queried the appeal of the band’s album track ‘Join The Party’ on the grounds that the song’s twelve bar blues structure is uninspiring. In truth, I do find this song far less enjoyable than, say, ‘Deft Left’ and for reasons which, on reflection, are tied to the familiarity and overt simplicity of ‘Join The Party’. The latter song, in short, appears to me to be something which Thee Faction probably just tossed off, perhaps

to fill their album up. 'Deft Left', by contrast, is sufficiently superior within the band's catalogue to date that it was re-recorded for a later album, 2013's *Good Politics: Your Role As An Active Citizen Within Civil Society*.⁶⁶⁴

Does this mean that novelty actually *is* more important than I have suggested it to be in this book? Not quite, I would maintain. 'Deft Left', to stick with the example at hand, is not really novel at all in terms of the long history of post-war popular music history. The song has some pleasing blue notes and a fine r'n'b-orientated groove to it, but it would not have been very surprising, in musical terms, if it had been issued fifty years earlier. What makes 'Deft Left' stick out as a superior song, therefore, is not really that it is novel relative to popular music history but, rather, that it is distinctive relative to Thee Faction's overall output. What makes it distinctive? I am not convinced that such a question can be comprehensively answered when it comes to music, for there is always something which escapes words, just as there are always elements which escape what can be shown through musical notation. However, we can certainly identify some particular things. As noted, for example, there are the strategically placed blue notes in the vocal and a well-arranged ensemble groove; there is also something not entirely predictable about the build-up on the words 'make a new start'. The lyric is important too, certainly: to ask of the left 'when did we surrender?', further enquiring 'did I miss that meeting?', is cutting; to make a boxing analogy, by suggesting that we should instead use a 'deft left', is to fairly subtly encourage optimism.

I am not arguing for some judgment-free relativism as regards popular music, then: we need to make judgments if we prefer not to de-value the object of our attention. If a particular song or a particular album or band seems fresh and different and new, there is no sense in denying that this gives it a particular appeal. If a left-leaning message is accompanied with a feeling

⁶⁶⁴ Thee Faction, *Good Politics: Your Role As An Active Citizen Within Civil Society* (Soviet Beret), 2013

of freshness, this is obviously preferable to a song which feels like an uninspiring regurgitation of propaganda and familiar music (something of which I feel Thee Faction's 'Join The Party' is guilty).

Isn't it possible, though, to recognise individuality without recourse to ostentatious novelty? One thinks of Woody Guthrie's suggestion that there 'ain't nobody that can sing like me' within the song 'Way Over Yonder In The Minor Key': his songs may have been basic and familiar, and his words were often simple too, but Guthrie seems to have had a voice which rang out (and still rings out) with the richest character. Interestingly, he never actually recorded the song in question: only the lyric survived his death, being one of those which was eventually set to music by Billy Bragg and Wilco for the 1998 album *Mermaid Avenue*. In a way, then, Guthrie's 'voice' seems to have had such character that we don't even need to hear it to recognise it, arguably. In any case, the man clearly did not need to surprise us with new music or new poetic gestures in order to stamp his character on a repertoire which retains immense popularity in the twenty first century. I would argue that one can find such character in other cases, despite each one having a repetitive style of songwriting which lacks any obvious innovation: Billy Childish, the Ramones, Irving Berlin, Jonathan Richman and so on. These characters, it seems to me, do not need to leap out saying 'here I am!' with a modernist flourish; they get our attention through more subtle means. When we evaluate music like this, we tend to look for (that nebulous thing) 'what works', rather than what is ostentatiously new.

Another nuance I want to bring in to my overall argument is with regards to social position. In short, I think it is obvious that the greatest innovations in popular music have almost always come from the poorest sectors of society. Because the USA has been so important to popular music over the last hundred years and more, this has often been an African American constituency. (I am strongly disinclined to accept a geneticist essentialism which proposes

‘racial’ reasons for this vanguardism. On my view, socio-economic factors are more pertinent although of course one can guess that elements of African-derived musicality may have been transmitted orally/aurally to the likes of Scott Joplin and Tom Turpin; perhaps to Bo Diddley and even Kanye West too, but this I think would be very hard to demonstrate.) For such innovators, the element of novelty takes on a special character, I think, which has its own ‘political’ implications.

In order to expand this point, I want to make some observations in relation to turntablism, drawing on Mark Katz’s superb introduction to the art in question *Groove Music*. For Katz (but his view is based on laudably extensive research with practitioners), innovation is an important element within the history of turntablism. However, the ownership of novel techniques is less clear cut and is often communally established: ‘In the end, does it really matter who gets credit for new techniques – whether beat juggling or transforming – and can we even give a single person credit for their creation? The answers are yes, and maybe not.’⁶⁶⁵ The element of ‘credit’ is important because ‘innovation is a central value among hip-hop DJs’ but ‘In the end, when it comes to techniques, the individual provides, but the community decides.’⁶⁶⁶

Because their uses of technology have been so innovative, Katz suggests that ‘hip-hop DJs can be likened to inventors’ but he extends this to argue that ‘they invented themselves’ as successful and creative and admired people despite the socio-economic difficulties they faced.⁶⁶⁷ I have strong sympathies with Katz, and with the music-makers he describes, when

⁶⁶⁵ Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip Hop DJ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.120.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.120 and p.121.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.252.

he argues that ‘the story of the hip-hop DJ is the story of contemporary America, so strongly defined by the shifting dynamics of race, gender and class, so deeply shaped by entrepreneurship, innovation, and technology.’⁶⁶⁸ I note, however, the word ‘entrepreneurship’ in the preceding statement. Is this an ideal for the left for the future? Obviously not from a Marxist point of view, at least: one should hesitate before calling the successful hip-hop DJ a ‘class traitor’, I imagine, but obviously the fact that a few highly talented (and innovative, of course) DJs might manage to make a lot of money is hardly a solution to the overwhelming problem of socio-economic inequality.

A tonic to the (petty bourgeois, in fact) ideal of entrepreneurship is offered in some comments from internationally successful DJ Rob Paterson: developing DJ skills ‘really kind of set me off on a new path. It was a new start. It set me up with new networks and sources to new challenges and tasks . . . So, in my junior year I switched colleges, and I switched to music . . . What I could do exploded with newness.’⁶⁶⁹ As a schoolboy, then, DJing was rich in novelty for this individual. The novelty in question, however, was more of an internal than an external novelty, if I can put it like that: DJing was new to him personally, even if the skills he was developing had been established by others. The world today is full of amateur DJs, but very few of them will become ‘superstars’. If the creativity is significant to them as individuals, however, and if their DJing creates new and exciting moments for those around them, isn’t something important (a degree of empowerment, for example) happening here even if the DJing is not ‘changing the world’ in aesthetic terms? I would argue that this creativity *is* important, and that all such empowerment has a political dimension in a social

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid, p.253.

⁶⁶⁹ Quoted in Pamela Burnard, *Musical Creativities In Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.112.

system which, deliberately or not, tends to stifle creativity for the vast majority of individuals.

Finally, I want offer some brief ruminations on the fact that art and politics are not synonymous and, therefore, that we should never mistake popular music for politics as such. This does not mean that the makers of and the audience for popular music should excuse themselves from considering political issues – clearly this book would have no point if such was its conclusion. In the end, however, I am inclined to think that music has at best a metaphorical relation to direct political engagement and agency. G.W. Sok spent thirty years as vocalist of Dutch anarchist group The Ex, penning countless politically-orientated songs during those years. It is notable, however, that one of the last lyrics he wrote for the band, the song ‘2-2-3 Fridges’, concludes a characteristic diatribe on the state of society by asking ‘when do we stop pretending we can solve it with a song?’⁶⁷⁰

Pop musicians are not politicians, then, and buying a record does not equate to voting nor to direct action. Obviously I am not proposing that we switch off and leave politics to politicians and civil servants. It is interesting to note, though, that Noam Chomsky – surely one of the great politically-minded scholars of the last fifty years, arguably the greatest indeed – makes the following response when asked ‘Should we rewrite the system? How can we mobilize the American public?’. On Chomsky’s view, ‘The only way to mobilize the American public that I’ve ever heard of – or any other public – is by going out and joining them.’⁶⁷¹ For Chomsky, then, the important bit is not to rewrite things (‘the system’, as his interlocutor puts it, but also the methods and ethos of the left which would oppose that system, we could add) with some novel name or, as I call it, a politics of novelty. Rather, the crucial thing is to get out

⁶⁷⁰ G.W. Sok, *A Mix of Bricks And Valentines: Lyrics 1979-2009* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), p.343.

⁶⁷¹ Noam Chomsky, *Occupy* (London: Penguin, 2012), p.46.

there and be amongst the people, to join them and struggle with them for change. I am convinced that popular music can contribute valuably to this change – but unconvinced that this must be done with a fanfare of novelty and a firework display of innovation.

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