

ASHGATE CONTEMPORARY THINKERS
ON CRITICAL MUSICOLOGY SERIES

Taking Popular Music Seriously

Simon Frith



TAKING POPULAR MUSIC SERIOUSLY

As a sociologist Simon Frith takes the starting point that music is the result of the play of social forces, whether as an idea, an experience or an activity. The essays in this important collection address these forces, recognising that music is an effect of a continuous process of negotiation, dispute and agreement between the individual actors who make up a music world. The emphasis is always on discourse, on the way in which people talk and write about music, and the part this plays in the social construction of musical meaning and value. The collection includes nineteen essays, some of which have had a major impact on the field, along with an autobiographical introduction.

ASHGATE CONTEMPORARY THINKERS ON CRITICAL MUSICOLOGY SERIES

The titles in this series bring together a selection of previously published and some unpublished essays by leading authorities in the field of critical musicology. The essays are chosen from a wide range of publications and so make key works available in a more accessible form. The authors have all made a selection of their own work in one volume with an introduction which discusses the essays chosen and puts them into context. A full bibliography points the reader to other publications which might not be included in the volume for reasons of space. The previously published essays are published using the facsimile method of reproduction to retain their original pagination, so that students and scholars can easily reference the essays in their original form.

Titles published in the series

Critical Musicology and the Reesponsibility of Respose

Lawrence Kramer

Music and Historical Critique

Gary Tomlinson

Titles to follow

Music, Performance, Meaning

Nicholas Cook

Sound Judgment

Richard Leppert

Reading Music

Susan McClary

Taking Popular Music Seriously

Selected Essays

SIMON FRITH

Tovey Professor of Music, University of Edinburgh, UK

ASHGATE CONTEMPORARY THINKERS ON
CRITICAL MUSICOLOGY SERIES

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2007 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Copyright © 2007 Simon Frith

Simon Frith has asserted his moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

ISBN 9780754626794 (hbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Frith, Simon

Taking popular music seriously : selected essays. -
(Ashgate contemporary thinkers on critical musicology series)
1. Popular music - History and criticism 2. Popular music -
Social aspects
I. Title
781.6'4

US Library of Congress Control Number: 2006940013

Transferred to Digital Printing in 2012

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	ix
<i>Complete Bibliography</i>	xiii
1 Youth and Music (1978)	1
2 'The Magic That Can Set You Free': The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community (1981)	31
3 Rock and Sexuality (with Angela McRobbie) (1978/79)	41
4 Afterthoughts (1985)	59
5 Formalism, Realism and Leisure: the Case of the Punk (1980)	65
6 Art vs Technology: the Strange Case of Popular Music (1986)	77
7 The Industrialization of Popular Music (1987)	93
8 Playing With Real Feeling: Making Sense of Jazz in Britain (1988)	119
9 The Suburban Sensibility in British Rock and Pop (1997)	137
10 The Discourse of World Music (2000)	149
11 Pop Music (2001)	167
12 Look! Hear! The Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television (2002)	183
13 Music and Everyday Life (2003)	197
14 Why do Songs have Words? (1987)	209
15 Hearing Secret Harmonies (1986)	239

16	Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music (1987)	257
17	Adam Smith and Music (1992)	275
18	Music and Identity (1996)	293
19	What is Bad Music? (2004)	313
	<i>Index</i>	335

Acknowledgements

The author and publisher wish to thank the following for permission to use copyrighted material:

Cambridge University Press for 'The Magic That Can Set You Free' in R. Middleton and D. Horn ed., *Popular Music 1*, 1981, pp. 159–68; 'Pop Music' in S. Frith *et al* ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, 2001, pp. 93–107; 'Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music' in R. Leppert and S. McClary eds, *Music and Society. The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, 1987, pp. 133–49.

Constable and Company Ltd for 'Youth and Music' in *The Sociology of Rock*, 1978, pp. 37–58.

Manchester University Press for 'Hearing Secret Harmonies' in C. MacCabe ed., *High Theory/Low Culture. Analysing Popular Television and Film*, 1986, pp. 53–76.

Media, Culture and Society for 'Art vs Technology: the Strange Case of Popular Music', **8**, 1986, pp. 107–22.

Methuen and Co. Ltd. for 'Playing With Real Feeling. Making Sense of Jazz in Britain', *New Formations*, **4**, 1988, pp. 7–24; 'Adam Smith and Music', *New Formations*, 1992, **18**, pp. 67–83.

New Statesman for 'Afterthoughts' August 23 1985.

Popular Music for 'Look! Hear! The Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television', **21/3**, 2003, pp. 277–90.

Routledge for 'The Suburban Sensibility in British Rock and Pop' in R. Silverstone ed., *Visions of Suburbia*, 1997, pp. 269–79; 'Music and Everyday Life' in M. Clayton *et al* ed., *The Cultural Study of Music*, 2003, pp. 92–101; 'Why Do Songs Have Words?' in A.L. White ed., *Lost in Music. Culture, Style and the Musical Event*, 1987, pp. 77–106; 'What Is Bad Music?' in C.J. Washburne and M. Derno eds, *Bad Music. The Music We Love To Hate*, 2004, pp. 15–36.

Sage Publications, Inc. for 'The Industrialization of Popular Music' in J. Lull ed., *Popular Music and Communications*, 1992 edition, pp. 49–74; 'Music and Identity' in S. Hall and P. du Gay eds, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996, pp. 108–27.

Screen Education for 'Rock and Sexuality' (with Angela McRobbie) in *Screen Education*, **29**, 1978/79, pp. 1–19; 'Formalism, Realism and Leisure: the Case of Punk' originally published as 'Music for Pleasure' in *Screen Education*, **34**, 1980, pp. 163–74.

University of California Press for 'The Discourse of World Music' in G. Born and D. Hesmondhalgh ed., *Western Music and Its Others*, 2000, pp. 305–23.

Introduction

Although this volume is appearing in a series devoted to ‘critical musicology’ it will be obvious from the essays that follow that I am not in any conventional sense a musicologist. I was trained in sociology and approach music as a sociologist. My starting point is that whether as an idea, an experience or an activity, music is the result of the play of social forces. And it is the play of social forces (rather than musical notes) that these essays address.

I studied sociology as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1960s and as a neophyte lecturer at the University of Warwick in the early 1970s (teaching a subject is the best way of learning it). In these places, at that time, it was probably inevitable that my approach to music was influenced in equal part by Marxism and symbolic interactionism, ‘a somewhat barbaric neologism’, in the words of the man who coined the phrase, Herbert Blumer. Blumer (who chaired the Berkeley Sociology Department while I was there) suggests that:

Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the thing he encounters.¹

From this (and, in particular, from Blumer’s student, Howard S. Becker, whose 1950s work on ‘the dance musician’ was still inspirational for me in the 1960s) I understood that music is an effect of a continuous process of negotiation, dispute and agreement between the individual actors who make up a music world. One aspect of this argument became especially significant in my own work: the emphasis on discourse, on the way in which people talk and write about music, and the part this plays in the social construction of musical meaning and value.

Marxism, meanwhile, was a rather vague academic label by the time I was a graduate student. In broad terms I understood that to study contemporary music was to study a culture industry, a term first developed by the Frankfurt School in Germany (and, in particular, by the music scholar, T.W. Adorno) as part of its critique of mass society in the 1930s (I was taught the Sociology of Culture at Berkeley by a Frankfurt exile, Leo Lowenthal). The starting point of my *Sociology of Rock* was the Marxist approach to mass culture: music involved processes of production and consumption mediated by ideology. But my approach differed from mass culture critique in two respects.

¹ Herbert Blumer: *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method*, Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc 1969, 1–2.

First, Adorno's characteristic pessimism (and its underpinning philosophical and psychoanalytic positions) were replaced by a more cheerful belief in the possibilities of class struggle at the cultural level, by an activist's optimism derived theoretically from Adorno's fellow German intellectuals, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, and from the Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci. I was influenced here by the work of Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, whose seminars I attended when I arrived at nearby Warwick in the early 1970s.

Second, I had an empirical (rather than theoretical) view of Marxist methodology (the result of having written a PhD thesis in historical sociology, on working class education in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century). I was more interested in how capitalism worked materially than in the abstract arguments about ideology and structure that dominated left-wing university debate in Britain at that time. I thought that being a Marxist sociologist of music meant making sense of day-to-day decision making in the music market in economic rather than philosophical terms. It meant examining music by reference to its means of production and to the situations of power (and powerlessness) in which music makers and listeners lived. In the *Sociology of Rock* (the source of the first essay selected here) I was therefore interested in understanding youth (and therefore youth music) as a category in the organisation of work (and leisure) rather than for its speculative ideological or symbolic meaning.

Even in this abridged version of my intellectual formation it is clear that there was a tension between the two positions to which I subscribed. On the one hand, I assumed that the social meaning of music was determined, in the last instance, by material factors—by the economic logic of a music industry, by the power of a dominant class. On the other hand, I was fascinated by the way people made music and musical arguments for themselves, inventively, in the situations in which they found themselves. In trying to resolve (or perhaps ignore) the contradictions here I rejected what was still academic common sense when I started writing (among musicologists and Marxists alike), the suggestion that we could distinguish between music that was entirely determined by commercial forces and music that was entirely autonomous, between pop (whose meaning was exhausted by an analysis of its money-making purpose) and art (that could be studied without any reference to sociology at all). I rejected the notion that because pop music was commercial it couldn't be art, just as I assumed that art music was the result, in its own way, of economic and political forces.

One reason such assumptions about the differences between serious and popular music made no sense to me at all was because I began writing about music at precisely the moment when a new way of doing pop, rock, was taking social, musical and cultural shape. And what was fascinating about rock from both my sociological and fan perspectives was that it was both straightforwardly commercial (rock albums were by the end of the 1960s the most profitable musical commodities ever) and self-consciously anti-commercial and arty. Rock interested me academically as a discourse in which the contradictions at issue for all music-making in a capitalist society were constantly, self-consciously, addressed. This interest is apparent in the next three essays collected here. 'The Magic That Can Set You Free', an examination of rock's founding ideology, was published in the launch issue of *Popular Music*, then a year book but soon to become the academic journal which did more than any other to establish serious popular music studies. 'Rock and Sexuality' was written with Angela McRobbie, a

pioneer in the development of feminist cultural studies. 'Formalism, Realism and Leisure: the Case of Punk' was an early take on a research project I'd begun with Howard Horne on the role of art schools in British popular culture.

Each of these essays had a polemical purpose. Each challenged developing orthodoxies: that rock was a new kind of folk music, that rock was sexually liberating, that punk was the sound of the dole queue. And each addressed the defining characteristic of popular musicology: that it is popular! Rock was first theorised by practitioners rather than academics, by journalists, musicians and audiences, by record companies and their PR departments, by radio producers and deejays. The key to an understanding of popular music was, I had come to realise, not high but low theory. The importance of such writers as Dave Laing and Charlie Gillett in Britain, Greil Marcus and Robert Christgau in the USA, lay less in their books (which are, in fact, of the highest academic standard) than in their weekly journalism, their everyday engagement with music and musical institutions as critics and reporters. They were the models for my own attempt to combine the academic study of popular music with rock journalism.

One aspect of this, which I think I would have missed if I had been just an academic, was everyday dealing with record companies (the source of my supply of records, concert tickets, press packs, etc). Record company practices were, I realised, more peculiar—more irrational—than my Marxist assumptions had led me to expect. This led me to research the history of the music industry, to rethink rock in a long historical framework. The next two essays here, 'Art vs Technology: the Strange Case of Popular Music' and 'The Industrialization of Popular Music', came out of this work. They turned out to be quite influential pieces (at least in terms of citation), perhaps because they so explicitly challenged the prevailing belief in rock's musical and artistic 'authenticity'. What music industry history revealed to me, though, was that rock discourse, its very claim to being different, could be traced back through earlier musical movements, such as jazz, and forward through later musical movements, such as world music. Such continuities are the subject of the next three essays collected here.

By the millennium the first rock generation was in its fifties and belief that rock was a special sort of popular culture was essentially nostalgic. The academic study of popular music (as reflected in the pages of *Popular Music* and at conferences of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music) was now the study of all kinds of genre from all kinds of place and time. What increasingly interested sociological scholars was *how* music mattered to people rather than what sort of music it was. This question is explored in the essays here on 'pop' as a musical category, on music and television and on music and everyday life.

In the 1990s, as my musical tastes as listener and critic became more eclectic, my academic interests became increasingly focused on issues of musical value, on the everyday processes of musical judgement, on the ways in which people just know (within genres) that one artist or recording is better than another. These questions had always been involved in my interest in musical discourse, but they had also always been something of a challenge to sociological methodology. To understand the social and discursive practices through which people respond to music as good or bad necessarily involves paying attention to what they perceive to be *in* the music. The issues here are explored in the final group of essays collected here. 'Why Do Songs Have Words' was my first attempt to consider what pop songs mean to people *as songs*. 'Hearing Secret Harmonies' examines the way in which film music both

draws on and shapes people's ability to be moved by various musical devices. 'Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music' was my first attempt to move from functional to aesthetic analysis or, rather, to suggest that a theory of musical value could be constructed on the basis of an understanding of music's social purposes. 'Adam Smith and Music' examines eighteenth-century philosophical and musicological arguments about rhetoric and performance as ways of understanding the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, an issue further explored, in more individualised terms, in 'Music and Identity'. Finally, 'What Is Bad Music?' brings these sometimes abstract arguments down to earth, rooting them in our routine experiences of musical abuse!

I hope that the cumulative effect of all these essays is to convince readers that a sociologist can have useful and illuminating insight into the ways in which musical values and meanings work. Whether this counts as 'critical musicology' I'm not sure. There is little here on specific pieces of music, nothing that could be considered formal analysis. On the other hand, I am convinced that musicologists must take account of the sociological understanding of the musical worlds in which pieces of music become possible in the first place, just as sociologists cannot understand these musical worlds fully without reference to music and how it works. Reading through the essays again I realise that underlying my various changes of interest and approach is a continuing belief in a modified Marxist dictum: people make their own music, but only in the circumstances in which they find themselves. This not only has methodological consequences—as a sociologist of music one has to pay attention always to the dialectic of necessity and invention—but also phenomenological implications. Music is a material practice offering a transitory experience of the ideal.

Complete Bibliography

Books

The Sociology of Rock, Constable, 1978.

Sound Effects, Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll, Pantheon, New York, 1981.

(with Howard Horne) *Art into Pop*, Methuen, 1987.

Music for Pleasure, Essays on the Sociology of Pop, Polity, Cambridge and Routledge, New York, 1988.

ed. *Facing the Music. A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, Pantheon, New York, 1988 and Mandarin, London, 1989.

ed. *World Music, Politics and Social Change*, Manchester University Press, 1989.

ed. (with Andrew Goodwin) *On Record. Pop, Rock and the Written Word*, Pantheon, New York and Routledge, London, 1990.

ed. (with Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg) *Sound and Vision: Music. Video. Television*, Routledge, 1993.

ed. (with Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and John Shepherd) *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies and Institutions*, Routledge, 1993.

ed. *Music and Copyright*, Edinburgh University Press, 1993.

Performing Rites. On the Value of Popular Music, Harvard University Press/Oxford University Press, 1996.

ed. (with Will Straw and John Street) *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

ed. *Popular Music. Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, Routledge, 2004, 4 volumes.

ed. (with Lee Marshall) *Music and Copyright*, Edinburgh University Press/Routledge (USA), 2004.

Articles

- ‘Popular Music 1950–1980’ in George Martin ed., *Making Music*, F. Muller, 1983, 18–48.
- ‘Art vs Technology. The Strange Case of Popular Music’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 8(3) 1986, 263–80.
- ‘The Making of the British Record Industry 1920–1964’, in J. Curran, A. Smith and P. Wingate eds., *Impacts and Influences. Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century*, Methuen, 1987, 278–90.
- ‘The Industrialisation of Popular Music’, in J. Lull ed., *Popular Music and Communication*, Sage, 1987, 53–77.
- ‘The Aesthetics of Popular Music’, in R. Leppert and S. McClary eds., *Music and Society*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, 133–49.
- ‘Copyright and the Music Business’ *Popular Music*, 7(1) 1987, 1–19.
- ‘What is Good Music?’, *Canadian University Music Review*, 10(2) 1990, 92–102.
- ‘The Cultural Study of Popular Music’, in L. Grossberg et al eds., *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, 1991, 174–186.
- ‘From Beatles to Bros. Twenty-Five Years of British Pop’ in N. Abercrombie and D. Warde eds., *Social Change in Contemporary Britain*, Polity, 1992, 40–53.
- ‘Adam Smith and Music’, *New Formations*, 18, 1992, 67–83.
- ‘Representatives of the People: Voices of Authority in Popular Music’ in *Mediterranean Music Cultures and their Ramifications*, Sociedad Espanola de Musicologia, 1994.
- ‘What is Bad Music?’ *Musiken ar 2002* (Rapport nr.11), Kungl. Musikaliska Akademien Stockholm, 1994, 3–27.
- ‘Reviving the Folk’, Essay Review, *Popular Music*, 13(3) 1994, 345–53.
- ‘The Academic Elvis’ in R. King and H. Taylor eds. *Dixie Debates. Perspectives on Southern Culture*, Pluto Press, 1996, 99–114.
- ‘Music and Identity’ in S. Hall and P. du Gay eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage, 1996, 108–27.

- ‘Entertainment’ in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch ed. *Mass Media and Society*, (2nd edition), Edward Arnold, 1996, 160–76.
- ‘Does Music Cross Boundaries?’ in A. Van Hemel ed., *Trading Culture: GATT, European Cultural Policies and the Transatlantic Market*, Boekmanstichting, 1996, 157–63.
- ‘The Suburban Sensibility in British Rock and Pop’ in R. Silverstone ed., *Visions of Suburbia*, Routledge, 1996, 269–79.
- ‘Popular Music Policy and the Articulation of Regional Identities: the Case of Scotland and Ireland’, *Music in Europe*, European Music Office, Bruxelles, September 1996, 98–103.
- ‘Vaerdisporgsmalet inden for populaemusik’ in C. Madsen and B.M. Thomsen eds., *Tidsen Former*, Aarhus University Press, 1997, 92–112.
- ‘Shaping the Future’ *Finnish Music Quarterly*, 2/99, 28–30.
- ‘Politics and the Experience of Music’, *Sociologisk arbok*, 1999, 1–15.
- ‘La Constitucion de la Musica Rock como Industria Transnacional’, in L.Puig and J.Talens ed., *Las culturas del rock*, Pre-Textos/Fundacion Bancaja (Spain), 1999, 11–30.
- ‘Power and Policy in the British Music Industry’ in Howard Tumber ed., *Media Power, Professionals and Policy*, Routledge 2000, 70–83.
- ‘The Discourse of World Music’ in Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh eds., *Western Music and Its Other*, University of California Press, 2000, 305–22.
- ‘Music Industry Research: Where Now? Where Next? Notes from Britain’, *Popular Music*, 19(3), 2000, 387–93.
- ‘The Centre Writes Back. A Response to YOUNG’, *YOUNG. Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 8(3) 2000, 47–51.
- ‘Film Music Books: a review article’, *Screen*, 41(3) 2000, 334–38.
- ‘L’industrializzazione della musica e il problema dei valori’, in J-J. Nattiez ed., *Enciclopedia della musica. Volume primo: Il Novecento*, Torino: Einaudi, 2001, 953–65.
- ‘Note introduttive’, F.D’Amato ed., *Sound Tracks. Tracce, convergenze e scenari degli studi musicali*, Roma: Meltemi, 2001, 11–23.
- ‘Music and Everyday Life’, *Critical Quarterly*, 44(1) 2002, 35–48.

-
- ‘An Essay on Criticism’, T. Carson, K. Rachlis and J. Salamon eds., *Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough. Essays in Honor of Bob Christgau*, Austin, Texas: Nortex Press, 2002, 65–9.
- ‘Illegality and the Music Industry’ in M. Talbot ed.: *The Business of Music*, Liverpool University Press, 2002, 195–216.
- ‘Fragments of a Sociology of Rock Criticism’ in Steve Jones ed.: *Pop Music and the Press*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002, 235–46.
- ‘Gatherings’ in *New Routes. A World of Music from Britain*, British Council, 2002, 10–13.
- ‘Look! Hear! The Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television’, *Popular Music* 21(3) 2002, 249–62.
- ‘Globalização E Fluxo Cultural: O Caso Da Música Rock Anglo-Americana’, *Forum Sociológico*, 7/8, 2002, 127–43.
- ‘Music and Everyday Life’, Martin Clayton, Richard Middleton and Trevor Herbert ed: *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 92–101.
- ‘Does British music still matter? A reflection on the changing status of British popular music in the global music market’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 2004, 43–58.
- “‘And I guess it doesn’t matter anymore.’ European Thoughts on American Music”, Eric Weisbard ed: *This is Pop. In Search of the Elusive at the Experience Music Project*, Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004, 15–25.
- ‘Why does music make people so cross?’ and ‘Reply to Gary Ansdell and Bent Jensen’, *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 13(1) June 2004, 66–71; 78–80.
- (with Martin Cloonan and John Williamson): ‘What is music worth? Some reflections on the Scottish Experience’, *Popular Music*, 23 (2), May 2004, 213–21.
- ‘Reasons to be cheerful. A review essay’ *Popular Music*, 23 (3), 2004, 363–72.
- ‘What is bad music?’ Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno ed. *Bad Music*, New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 15–36.
- ‘The best disco record: Sharon Redd: “Never Give You Up”’ Alan McKee ed. *Beautiful Things in Popular Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, 193–203.

CHAPTER 1

Youth and music

A lively, regular and varied social programme is vital to the building of Young Socialist branches. Every branch should aim to hold a regular discothèque to attract hundreds of youth in the area . . . (*Young Socialist*, 3 April 1976.)

Young people's interest in music is taken for granted by everyone these days, and although post-war sociologists were initially surprised that teenagers should 'frequently and spontaneously' express a love of music, they already knew that young people had their own leisure pursuits and that one of the most popular was dancing. A 1951 survey of British leisure, commenting on 'the importance of dancing as a means of spending leisure', added that

a large majority of dancers are young people, mostly between the ages of 16 and 24 . . . drawn from the working and lower middle classes.

These authors went on to voice familiar fears of teenage hedonism:

Modern ballroom dancing may easily degenerate into a sensuous form of entertainment, and if self-control is weakened with alcohol it is more than likely that it will do so, which might easily lead at least to unruly behaviour and not infrequently to sexual immorality.¹

Concern for the young at play can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when a variety of institutions appeared to regulate the leisure of proletarian youth. By the 1930s remarks on the 'independence' and even 'affluence' of young workers were commonplace, but although jazz, particularly as a form of dance music, was seen to have a special appeal to the young, neither it nor any other form of popular music was seen as an expression of a youth culture.²

The full integration of pop music and youth culture was a development of the 1950s and was symbolised by a new form of music, rock 'n'roll, and a new form of youth, teddy boys. If the young had always had idols – film stars, sportsmen, singers such as Frank Sinatra and Johnnie Ray – the novelty of rock'n'roll was that its performers

were 'one of themselves', were the teenagers' own age, came from similar backgrounds, had similar interests. The rise of rock'n'roll was accompanied by the development of a generation gap in dancing, as dance halls advertised rock'n'roll nights or became exclusively rock'n'roll venues. In 1954 it was estimated that nine-tenths of London's teenagers spent some of their leisure time listening to records, and among the more visible features of the new world of teenage consumption were the self-service record 'Browseries' and 'Melody Bars'. When Abrams' teenage consumer report came out in 1959 its statistics on music reflected findings that were being made simultaneously by sociologists.³

Abrams showed that music and activities involving music absorbed a significant part of young expenditure, and in 1961 Coleman's mammoth survey of American adolescents confirmed that music was their most popular form of entertainment and that rock'n'roll was their most popular form of music. The importance of rock in young people's lives became an axiom of British youth research. In her 1964-5 survey of 15- to 19-year-olds in Glasgow, Jephcott noted that 'pop in any form was an almost universal interest . . . the word "pop" brought a sigh of relief - "Here's something we *want* to talk about".' The young's interest in pop determined the television programmes they watched, the magazines they read, the caf  s they went to, the 'necessary tools' - transistor, record player, tape recorder, guitar - they sought to own.⁴

Jephcott did her research at the time of the beat boom (Lulu and the Luvvers were a local community group!) but there is no evidence to suggest that her findings should be confined to the mid-sixties. Researchers in the 1970s have replicated Coleman's findings that pop is central to the teenage social system, and a recent survey of the British literature on adolescent leisure concluded that 'music is in many ways the central activity of the British youth culture, from which many subsidiary activities flow'. White's account of young workers in Wembley is a good illustration of this point. He shows that it is the presence of 'their music' that attracts young people to pubs and discos and youth clubs, and that:

Home-made entertainment means only one thing - music. Front rooms are occasionally leased from parents for planned parties, but generally this home music-making involves an impromptu visit, a couple of young people going round to a friend's house. Baby-sitting provides a good opportunity for listening to new LPs. And the young workers do listen. This is quite different from the overpowering musical wallpaper of the Village Inn [a pub], almost an act of worship.⁵

Youth and music

39

Abrams' 1959 study has never been repeated in so clear a form, but the importance of youth's consumption of musical products has continued to be emphasised in market research. A national teenage survey in 1974 confirmed that the majority of 15- to 24-year-olds go dancing and buy records regularly, own their own record players and radios, and have an overwhelming musical preference for rock music and Top Thirty pop. This pattern of music use is not confined to British youth or even to capitalist youth, although if in America and Britain it was the advent of rock'n'roll that signalled the arrival of musical youth culture, for most European countries it did not emerge clearly until the success of the Beatles in the 1960s.⁶

While there can be no doubting the importance of music for the young, these surveys, sociological or not, are descriptive: music's presence in youth culture is established, but not its purpose. Jephcott suggests that if music is a universal teenage interest, it is also a superficial one – the impression left by her research is of a culture in which music is always heard but rarely listened to.⁷ This impression is given statistical support by this finding in the Schools Council's 1968 survey of young school-leavers:

Table 4:

Percentage saying that pop music was important to themselves/to their children/to their pupils

	<i>boys</i>	<i>girls</i>
Children	20	35
Parents	41	64
Teachers	38	71

Source: Schools Council (1968), pp. 167–90.

These figures suggest that young people assess the music in their lives as much less significant than its constant noise makes it sound to outsiders, and it is time now to examine youth's use of music in more detail.

The use of music

In 1972 I conducted a survey of 14- to 18-year-olds at a comprehensive school in Keighley, Yorkshire, and I want to begin this section with a brief summary of the results.⁸

In general terms, the pupils in my sample were all in much the same situation: as school children, they were not affluent – pocket money averaged from 50p for the 14-year-olds to £1.50 for the sixth-formers, supplemented by varying part-time earnings – but most had their own

rooms, and most owned the basic tools for music playing – radios, record players and/or recorders. The children were similar, too, in their general attitudes to music: they were ‘quite’ rather than ‘very’ interested in it; devoted ‘some’ time, but not ‘a lot’, to talking about it; spent a proportion of their income on it, but not an overwhelming one. On the whole, though, they all listened to music as a normal part of their daily lives, and the shared knowledge involved was reflected in the ease with which all my sample could comment on all genres of rock – a question on T. Rex, for example, was answerable by everyone, fan or not, and even the two classical-music devotees knew what T. Rex records sounded like. A basic experience of rock was common to all these young people, whatever their class or academic background, and the findings that most interested me were the different patterns of music use and taste *within* this framework.

Firstly, there was a distinct sixth-form culture, a pattern of rock use shared by all the sixth-formers to whom I spoke (mostly but not necessarily middle-class in background) which merged into student culture and was already being adopted by the academic pupils below them. These pupils bought albums rather than singles, had ‘progressive’ rather than ‘commercial’ tastes, were not involved in the trappings of rock (if they did, in a desultory way, watch *Top of the Pops* and listen to Radio 1, *The Old Grey Whistle Test* was the only show they made a special effort to see), and went to performance-based gigs – folk clubs, rock concerts – more than to discos or dances. The ideological essence of this culture was its individualism. Typical replies to questions about influences on taste were:

I like what I like, no one changes my opinions on music . . .

I like what I like, not what I’m told or influenced to like . . .

Choosing records was an individual decision of some importance: albums were never bought spontaneously or on spec and sixth-formers rejected the idea that records were chosen to fit an image or group identity; they didn’t accept that they had an image (‘I am myself’) or else accepted it only reluctantly (‘I suppose I have, although I don’t readily admit it’; ‘I hope not’; ‘I do not *want* an image’). The role of the musically knowledgeable in informing and stimulating rock interest was acknowledged – boys were more likely than girls to play the role of opinion leader – but, in the end, musical taste was individual. Records were listened to, appreciated and criticised in terms of their meaning – lyrics were an important but not the only source of such meaning – and music was praised in terms of its originality, sincerity and beauty, or condemned for its triviality, banality, repetition. ‘Rubbish’ was the favourite pejorative word for

Youth and music

41

'commercial trash which gets in your head and you can't escape and it does nothing for you except make you puke'.

Such sixth-formers experienced youth culture as a culture with an articulated set of values different from those of an older generation; they saw themselves as 'rebellious against unreasonable ideas and conventional ways of doing things'. Their fear was that even youth culture was not a true or meaningful expression of individuality:

Rock music is unfortunately fashionable and its followers are exploited. It is very hard to separate true opinion from 'conditioned response'.

In sharp contrast to this was the lower-fifth culture of the pupils who bought singles and watched *Top of the Pops*, were regulars at youth clubs and discos but rarely went to concerts, who emphasised beat and sound in their tastes rather than meaning, who identified with a specific youth style and its music, and whose standard mode of criticism of other tastes was abuse:

T. Rex are shit. I've heard kids whistle better than that group. Music, it's all the same, no difference in rhythm or sound. They're all a set of pufas, Bolan with all his make-up and god knows what his wife thinks about wearing glitter under his eyes. Other groups wear it but don't go round talking like a puff. T. Rex ARE CRAP.

But having established that there were distinct rock cultures, I must be careful not to misinterpret the differences. What was involved was ideology, the way people talked about music, more than activity, the way they actually used it. The apparent lyric *vs* beat difference, for example, conceals the fact that the sixth-formers did dance! They danced the same sort of self-taught 'freak' and 'mod' and 'bop' styles as the other pupils and shared their appreciation of the standard dance music like Motown.⁹

If sixth-formers used music for dancing and background as often as for concentrated listening, so the lower fifth-formers were aware of lyrics, could remember and appreciate them, had some notion of songs' meanings – 'love is much better to sing about than a football team' – and responded to the messages and stories of rock and soul singles.

Similarly, I don't want to exaggerate the difference between the individualism of the sixth-formers and the group identities of the lower fifth. The latter were aware of the playfulness of their groups – 'the image changes – it's just for laughs' – and conscious of their individuality within them. Group styles were a matter of convenience

and all the pupils could make an instant equation of group and music even when they did not fit themselves *into* such groups:

I have assorted friends – some hairies, some crombie boys and girls. I can sit and listen to both sorts of music and don't mind either. . . .

I'm in between a skinhead and a hippie. I wear 'mod' clothes but I listen to both kinds of music. . . .

I wear skinhead clothes, but I don't just like that type of music. . . .

And consider these two more extended comments from lower-stream fourth-formers:

I don't know what youth culture means. I think it means what you are – skin, grebo, or hairie. I am none of these. Beat that, I think. The groups have different outlooks on sex, drugs and politics. The lot of it is different views to that of my parents. My brother was a skinhead gang leader for three years. Music is not important to any group, to me music is what I like, not everybody else's opinion.

I think that music makes up for 75% of youth culture and that the music you like depends on the cult you're in. This idea of cult is taken too far. Teenagers can't be split into hating each other with a few in the middle just because they have different viewpoints. But they are.

On the other hand, one of the most militant groups among 15- and 16-year-olds was that of the future sixth-formers, the self-identified hairies and hippies, with their missionary zeal for progressive rock and a hatred of commercial pop:

Rock music, progressive and heavy are fantastic. If they were not there life would not be worth living. They are the backbone behind music as a whole – showing us what it should really be like.

It was from this group that the most assertive statements of image and shared tastes came. If group identity is part of teenage culture for conventional reasons – 'if you like soul or reggae music and they like rock you will both wear different clothes and you may split up to go with your own group' – then even people with an ideology of individual taste become a group of individualists and need the symbols and friends and institutions to assert themselves as a group:

Youth and music

43

I listen at home most of the time, in my room. I don't often go to parties. Don't go to clubs 'cos I haven't anyone to go with and the clubs round here aren't the places which I enjoy going to. Dances are a bit like clubs, the people that go aren't the sort of people I mix with well. Discos are the same, my sort of people don't go there. I love concerts but it's difficult for me to get to them or get tickets. I go when I can. I listen alone or with a friend most. There's not a lot of people in our village which like progressive music.

One of the paradoxes in my survey was that the group which most stressed individual musical choice also most stressed the importance of shared musical taste for friendship – music served as the badge of individuality on which friendship choices could be based. One of the ironies was that because music was taken as a symbol of a cluster of values, the most individualistic groups were the ones most thrown by their musical heroes changing direction. This was particularly a problem for the hairies because they differentiated themselves from the masses as a self-conscious elite by displaying exclusive musical tastes. When one of their acts went commercial ('sold out') and became part of mass taste there was great bitterness:

What do you think of T. Rex? I do not usually think of them. It puts me off my meals whenever I think about T. Rex. They were once good when called Tyrannosaurus Rex – Next Best Thing to Beatles and Stones. T. Rex are very bopperish. It's all the same music like Tamla. N.B. Marc Bolan and Micky Finn are *Two of a kind*. Puff Puff Puff.

There are two other points I must make about different uses of music. Firstly, there were some pupils whose musical cultures were quite different from those I've described, either because they were not essentially youth-cultural (a small group of Pakistani pupils whose tastes were entirely for Pakistani performers, a brass-band fanatic, the two classical musicians) or because they were subscribers to a musical cult that really was the centre of their lives – there was a soul freak in my sample, and a couple of rock'n'rollers, who had quite distinct patterns of record buying, dancing and magazine reading.

Secondly, the class/academic cultural differences were interwoven with age and sex differences. One aspect of the difference between sixth-form and lower-fifth culture was that sixth-formers were older. It was clear in my survey that the maximum involvement in youth groups and their symbols occurred in the fourth year, when most pupils had some such identity; by the fifth year most were claiming non-membership and by the sixth there were no admitted group

members at all. There were also distinctions between the sexes. Girls were more interested in dancing and tended to be more concerned with rock lyrics, especially with the words of love. They were all aware of the special female features of pop culture – fan clubs, *Fab 208*, star personalities – even if only a small minority were interested enough to get involved in them. I shall return to the sex division in youth cultures in the next chapter.

I want to conclude this section with a qualitative description of the pupil cultures I found in Keighley. Alison and her friends were a group of sixth-formers and students who had a busy and self-contained social life, meeting weekly at the folk club (most of them picked at guitars themselves), at parties in each others' houses, at concerts or the bar at the local universities, at selected pubs. The group tended to come from middle-class backgrounds (the local professional and management class) and this had some effect on the material basis of their leisure – they had access to cars, for example, which made them mobile – but they were not particularly well off in terms of income, spent a large proportion of non-school time studying and were consequently at home a lot. Working-class sixth-formers fitted into this culture without much difficulty.

Music was used as a background to their lives, radio and records were always on. The records were LPS, chosen carefully and individually and often saved for after hearing a friend's copy; there was much mutual listening and temporary exchanging of records and few people in the group had a large record collection, although a crucial musical role was played by older brothers and sisters and friends who had more records, knew what was happening and turned the group on to new sounds. The overall result was an eclecticism of taste, with individuals developing their own specialisms – folk, heavy, singer/songwriter; they were aware of general rock trends but not particularly interested in them.

This group was conscious of itself as a group and differentiated itself clearly from the culture of its parents, but what really dominated its members' lives was a sense of possibility. They were all preparing to move on – to universities and colleges, to new towns and opportunities, to new sexual and social experiences; they were all aware that the group itself was transitional and temporary, that individuals had to maintain their individualism within it. They were articulate and self-aware and valued these qualities in music, to which they turned for support as well as for relaxation. They most valued music that was most apparently 'artistic' – technically complex or lyrically poetic – and tastes here went with other interests, in the other arts, in politics, in religion. There were few direct restraints on the activities of this group except the members' shortage of money;

Youth and music

45

they were successful at school and at home and rarely clashed with authority. But their life was already a career and the importance of exams and qualifications was fully realised. The resulting tensions made music all the more important – as the context for bopping, relaxing, petting, falling in love and shouting a temporary ‘Fuck the world!’.

Craig and his friends were in their last year at school, fifth-formers itching to get out. They would leave school without skill or qualification but had been used to failure for years and school was not so much oppressive now as irrelevant. Their lives already revolved around the possibilities of (unskilled) work – most members of the group were already working part-time – and their leisure reflected this expectation. The group went out (no bother about studying) to the youth club, to the pubs that would take them, to the chippy and the bus station and the streets. None of this group were militantly members of any particular gang, but they had skinhead friends and relations, could run casually with them and with the emerging groups of mods and crombies and smooovies and knew which side they were on in a bundle; Friday night, for example, was the traditional time for a trip to Bradford, the boys for a fight, the girls for a dance at the Mecca.

This group had plenty of free time but little money or mobility and their leisure was consequently focused on public places, putting them in constant confrontation with the controllers of those spaces – police and bus conductors and bouncers. But home wasn’t much freer and so the boys went out most nights, doing nothing, having a laugh, aware that this was their youth and that their future would be much like the past of their working-class parents. Music was a pervasive part of their lives, in their rooms and clubs, on the juke-box, at the disco. Sometimes, when they had the money, they’d buy that single that was really great. They knew the big names and what was in the charts and what was good to dance to, though they didn’t really follow it. The point was that when they were in their group they had their music and knew what it was without thinking much. And they knew what they hated, that hairy stuff, heavy rock – ‘it’s crackers the way it’s arranged – isn’t it?’ – though that mattered more at school than on the streets, where they were grown up already, went drinking with their brothers and their mates. Music was for the girls really, wasn’t it? It was the girls who stayed home and listened more, who even had their favourites pinned on the wall still and sometimes told the boys what to buy for their girl friends.

David’s and Peter’s friends were younger, in the fourth form, but committed to the academic route. They saw their futures stretching out through the sixth form and college – which was how David’s

parents and teachers saw it too, though Peter's had their doubts. They were young yet, lacked the resources and the mobility and the permission for student life. In chafing about this they were more aggressively hip, at school, in the youth club and most of all at home, where they'd gather their friends and sit round the record player like it was Moses or something, bringing messages from on high. It was important for this lot to distinguish themselves from everybody, teachers, parents, peers. They were hippies, hairies, in their clothes and attitudes and tastes and drugs, and they worked at it, read the music press, got passionate about their records and about the evils of commercialism. They were an élite, a group apart from the masses even if they were in the same school and youth club and street.

Most of these kids made it into the sixth form, no sweat, and entered that culture easily, the greater freedom and success accompanying a looser hipness so that their interests remained but their expression was less aggressive. Some, though, did not. Peter failed his O-levels. The school wouldn't have him in the sixth and wouldn't even give him a reference for the tech. He found his life-style incompatible with the unskilled work his father and brothers did, so he lived on the dole mostly, not articulate enough to say what he really wanted but hearing it in the music, which seemed like the right life if he could get it together. He dreamt about that in the cafés by day and the hippie pub by night, did a little dealing and always turned on his friends, still at school or home for the vac. He knew everything that was going on and believed more than ever what they'd all once believed, that 'rock is a real boost from reality', and he needed to believe it too, now more than ever.

Sociological explanations

I have presented a general and a particular description of young people's use of music and I want next to consider the existing sociological explanations of the importance of music in youth cultures. The first comes from adolescence theorists. With their concern for the problems of socialisation and transition, they focus on peer-groups as the social context in which children learn to be adults. Music is seen to be important to peer-groups for two reasons: it is a means by which a group defines itself, and it is a source of in-group status.¹⁰

The most vivid example of music functioning to define group identity is in Colin Fletcher's account of how rock'n'roll transformed Liverpool street gangs into beat groups, as every gang nurtured its own musicians, provided its own fans and started to fight its battles on stage with the 'wild and basic sound' of Mersey Beat:

Youth and music

47

This thumping sound made the clubs relatively complete as the new adolescent world, a whole new source of status within themselves. Adolescents had a music, a number of dances, a 'place of their own'.¹¹

This quote brings out the two aspects of musical identity: it distinguishes young from old, but it also distinguishes one peer-group from another:

What about me? I dig mod clothes but I don't wear them. I like the Beatles but don't rave over them. I listen to Blue Beat music but don't dance the Blue Beat way. I wear my hair long and sometimes use hair lacquer, but I don't sport a Blue Beat hat. I dig everything a mod raves over but I don't hunt with a mod pack. Recently I asked a typical mod boy what title I should come under. Sizing me up he said, 'You're not one of those in-between mods and rockers called mids. There's an Ivy League style about your suits and your appearance differs from the mid. I would put you under the title of – a Stylist.'¹²

Teenage styles reflect the need of all adolescents to 'belong' and one aspect of group identity is its stylistic precision:

True skinheads look neat. Their clothes are smart and expensive. Their boots are always polished to perfection. Their favourite clothes are Levi Sta-Prest, Harrington jackets, Jaytex (shirts), Bens (shirts), Crombies (coats), Blue-beats (hats), Doc's (Dr Marten's boots), Royals' (shoes), Monkey boots (girls' boots), Fred's (Fred Perry shirts), Toniks (two-tone suits).¹³

Another is that everyone gets put into a group, even if only negatively; *Sniffin' Glue*, the punks' magazine, refers to other groups as 'footballs' and 'discos', for example. Each group has its music, which can and must reflect the finest nuances: 'as skinheads become smoothies and skinhead girls begin to go out with smoothies they start to like T. Rex and Slade better than Motown'.¹⁴

This is a description of the Halloween dance in her village from one of my Keighley sample:

Just as in the youth club the two rival gangs sit at opposite ends of the room. The band will begin to play and everybody is waiting for everybody else to get up and dance. Then some girls will get up and dance and gradually the floor will fill up with people dancing. Suddenly the record will change to a rock record and

The consumption of rock

everybody makes their way back to the seats as the rockers get up and stand in a circle ready to start their dance. The older folk stand and look amazed as they start to dance, they most probably never seen anything like it before because they are doing cartwheels and splits in the middle of the circle. As their type of music dies away into the background, a Tamla Motown record comes on and all the mods get up and go into a circle and begin to dance. This carries on for most of the night, it's like one big dancing contest, trying to be better than the other. They have nothing against each other, they do it for fun and everybody enjoys themselves either laughing at them or laughing at the people's faces.

And after supper there are old-time dances for older people and the kids join in and 'pretend that they are on *Come Dancing*'.

In such a village the division into groups seems random (indeed, the groups fought together against neighbouring skinheads and rockers) and in general adolescent identities can be based on a variety of symbols, including fine musical differences within a single musical taste – Elvis vs Cliff, the Beatles vs the Stones, Donny Osmond vs David Cassidy. Even the slightest differences between groups can be matters of passionate argument and musical identity takes on a variety of references – one of the most visible is the phenomenon of everyone at a rock concert dressing like the star.¹⁵

The second use of music-as-identity is to distinguish the young from the old, to identify a place or occasion or time as youth's property. Music – played on transistor radios, record players, portable cassettes – becomes the easiest way for the young to maintain and display their control of their rooms, clubs and street corners, of their pubs and discos. The demands made of it – in terms of noise and beat and flash – are general rather than specific. If the noise is right, any noise will do – although familiarity is valued, hence the use of the charts. Music is the context for rather than the focus of youthful leisure. This is most noticeable in the central institution of teenage culture, the dance. It may be true, as Patterson has argued, that the impact of black dancing records – ska and soul and reggae – has reflected the needs of a newly violent and hedonistic white youth culture, but it is also true that the real focus of dances is the youthful displays and interactions which revolve around the 'exchange and mart' of sexual partners, and such displays long pre-date rock'n'roll. The music is the accompaniment of an activity, not its expression, or, as a 15-year-old in my sample put it:

And if the older people want to begin looking for a wife or husband, they have to go to Bradford Mecca.¹⁶

Youth and music

49

Although adolescent theorists claim to understand the functions of youth music they are not sanguine about its effects. Do teenage symbols express teenage concerns or do they manipulate them? There has always been a fear that the teenageness of teenage culture has rested on false idols, that the posters and the stars, the beat and the love lyrics and the rest of this world of teenage fantasy are a false expression of real needs. Teenage culture is seen as filling a need, but not really fulfilling it.¹⁷

My own research suggests that teenagers are much hipper about themselves and their world than the traditional adolescent image allows. They know how commercial rock works, even as they enjoy it. My sample's comments on T. Rex revealed an awareness (no doubt informed by the sneers of the hairies) of the relationship between record-making and money-making. In response to a question asking if they would like to be rock stars, there was only one fantasy along the lines of 'Yes, because you could enjoy yourself, you would be on TV and you would get lots of girl friends and fans.' Mostly there was realistic assessment of rock as a job something like the army – hard work but plenty of travel!

Adolescence theorists' evaluation of teenage culture rests on their understanding of adolescent needs. If the use of music can be explained as answering a need, it can also be judged according to how well it does so. The problem with this model, as I suggested in the last chapter, is that adolescent needs are defined in social-psychological terms, and related to the abstract difficulties of social transition. Leisure is not related to work or, indeed, given any material setting – school leaving, for example, does not, according to these theorists, have any major effects on youth's leisure needs; rather, 'it is leisure that provides the continuity between school and work'. Similarly, although most of the studies of adolescence are studies of working-class teenagers, the suggestion is that the analysis is classless; all adolescents have the same needs and create the same peer-group systems, music therefore fulfils the same purpose for all of them.¹⁸

This conclusion has been strongly criticised by Graham Murdock. In his own subtle interpretation of the use of music by secondary-school pupils, Murdock emphasises the sharp class differences within youth's use of similar musical symbols. He suggests that, as a source of peer-group status and identity, music must be contrasted with working-class street culture as well as with conformist school culture. He describes a pattern of music use similar to the one I found in Keighley: middle-class children interested in the 'underground' and concerned with lyrics, 'the source of those values, roles and meanings which the school undervalues'; working-class children interested in dance music and concerned with the beat – they got their 'alternative

50

The consumption of rock

meanings from street peer groups rooted in the situational cultures of working-class neighbourhoods' and music served them simply as a background and 'small coin of social exchange'. From such taste differences sprang the different media uses – *Top of the Pops* vs *The Old Grey Whistle Test* – and Murdock builds up a convincing picture of class differences maintained and even exaggerated by the different uses of a supposedly common youthful means of expression.¹⁹

There are difficulties, however, in the very neatness of Murdock's conclusions. Obviously I don't doubt the significance of class-based differences in rock use – my own research has similar implications and American sociologists have come up with the same general findings – but I do doubt the precision of Murdock's relationships. The evidence that working-class pupils are less interested in music than their middle-class colleagues, for example, can equally support findings that their taste choices are completely random! Whatever the differences within youth culture, the statistical evidence of an interest crossing class boundaries remains impressive. The readership of the music press, for example, whether the *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker* or *Fab 208*, includes a roughly similar percentage of readers from each class, as does the audience for Radio 1. Age remains a much better indicator of music use than class.²⁰

The problem is to explain the differences within a broadly similar pattern of music use, and Murdock misinterprets some of the differences he found. His research, like mine, was based on a survey of school children, young people in a very particular situation. His sample was poor, for example, and in terms of pocket money working-class children are certainly poorer than their middle-class peers – to what extent is their lesser involvement in music a matter of resources? Some of Murdock's distinctions, as he himself suggests, were related to sex rather than class differences, and how should the argument that middle-class pupils lack the freedom of the streets and base their leisure on the home be extended to students? But the central claim of Murdock's argument is that youth cultures get their meaning from their class base rather than from a universal state of adolescence. In the end, criticism must focus on the definition of class involved.

Murdock classified his pupils according to the occupations of their parents. While this is a good indicator of their likely class futures, it does mean that for the children themselves class was defined as a matter of family culture rather than of productive role: their class characteristics were the results of values and attitudes learnt at home and shaped by school, community and mass media; they were not the results of their own roles in production or in the labour process. Murdock's explanation of class differences in music use is in terms of

Youth and music

51

how class *values* structure responses to adolescent problems. Murdock brings class into the sociology of youth via the notion of youth sub-cultures: if all young people have a need for status and autonomy, how these needs are expressed and experienced depends on their different class-cultural backgrounds. I want to turn now to sub-cultural explanations of youth music.

Sub-cultural explanations

Characteristically, the teds' association with rock'n'roll came to public attention with the outbreak of rock'n'roll riots, disturbances in cinemas featuring rock'n'roll films. In the public mind teds and nastiness merged together in an uneasy blur of primitive rhythms and primitive behaviour. The sub-cultural account of rock takes off from this lead: youth's use of music is related to the behaviour of specific deviant groups. Sub-cultural theorists take teds, for instance, as an example of 'Lumpenproletariat youth'. Their lack of job satisfaction, their 'status frustration', made their leisure important – 'they seek from it the excitement, self-respect and autonomy which are so conspicuously absent from work'. But in their preoccupation with 'toughness, excitement, fate, autonomy and status' the teds were no different from other lower-class adolescents – it was just that their dependence on this culture was more 'intense and comprehensive' and their use of cultural symbols, clothes and music, was thus more jealously defended.²¹

The thrust of the sub-cultural approach is that youth music is a symbol which expresses the underlying leisure values of the group which uses it. The first difficulty with this explanation of rock is that the symbolic objects involved are usually provided by commercial interests rather than generated by the youth groups themselves. If the teds responded to rock'n'roll with passion, it was hardly teddy-boy music by either origin or even style (that connection only developed later with rock'n'roll revival and rocker culture). To interpret music as symbol, it is no good looking at how music is produced; the sociologist must show how youth groups give music its real meaning in the act of consumption, and the mods, the ultimate consumer group, have been taken as the model of a youth sub-culture.

It was the mods who first used music as an exclusive symbol, something with which to distinguish themselves from the conformist young:

They met at the Scene in Ham Yard off Great Windmill Street in London's West End, an all-night club where groups played, but whose main attraction was Guy Stevens' record sessions. Stevens'

collection of obscure black American records was the basis of mods' musical tastes and a cornerstone of the soul boom of the mid-sixties. At a time when it was commonplace to hear the Beatles and hip to listen to Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker and Howlin' Wolf, Stevens was playing James Brown and Otis Redding, Don Covay, Solomon Burke, the Miracles, the Impressions and Major Lance.²²

The mods' sociological image is confusing: on the one hand the moral-panic-inducing thugs of Margate and rocker-bashing, on the other hand the pill-popping all-night dancers and all-day consumers of Carnaby-Street style. Sub-culturalist theories seek to focus this double image. The description of the frustrated prole, pouring his needs into leisure, remains, but emphasis is put on the resulting mod style, a more self-conscious and creative mode of expression than ted style, more arrogant, narcissistic, cynical and tense. The mods came on like winners and consumption for them was as much a playground as a last resort; if sociologists have failed to ask the obvious questions (Why the scooters? Where did the money come from?) they have been able to make an elaborate reading of the nuances of mod style.²³

But the second difficulty with sub-cultural accounts of music is that, as a symbol, it becomes completely subsumed in the much more general notion of style. This is most obvious in the analysis of the skinhead sub-culture. They were rough kids again, displaced from working-class communities and occupations and seeking the 'magical recovery of community' through leisure, but they weren't much interested in musical expression – '“Reggae” was important for only a few months in 1969, but it was soon rejected as “West Indian music”.' This doesn't appear to faze the sub-cultural theorists one bit, they simply replace music in their analysis with football!²⁴

Teds, mods and skins are the three teenage groups that have been examined in the most detail by sub-cultural sociologists. Their findings rest on the theories outlined in the last chapter: these kids' uses of leisure are understood by reference to their lack of job satisfaction, their alienation from the community. Music (or football) is a symbolic expression of this dissatisfaction and alienation, and the particular styles adopted, rock'n'roll, soul, reggae – even when provided by commerce – can be read for their signs of youthful 'cultural space winning'. By their very nature the members of these sub-cultures are rarely articulate about their lives but the good sociologist can extrapolate the true meaning of their activities and styles.²⁵

The trouble with this approach is the narrowness of its focus. In

Youth and music

53

interpreting music as a *symbol* of leisure values, sub-culturalists fail to make sense of it as an *activity*, one enjoyed by the vast number of non-deviant kids. The error is clear in the suggestion that for some young people football is a substitute for music. The only way football could be such a substitute is at the symbolic level of group identity – via badges, heroes, talking-points; it can't be the same as an activity. Skinhead identity may not have been based on musical taste, but that didn't stop skins listening to music and enjoying all the usual music-based activities. Indeed, football-based identity soon became a part of rock as Slade, for example, and even David Cassidy made effective use of football chants and songs.²⁶

Sub-cultural theory rests on a false freezing of the youthful world into deviants and the rest. As my Keighley survey made clear, the fact is that kids pass through groups, change identities and play their leisure roles for fun. Observing sociologists are wrong to elevate the most visibly different leisure styles above the less apparent sexual and occupational differences in leisure activities. The exact role of music for these sub-cultures remains unclear and it is worth contrasting them with deviant groups which are truly focused on music.²⁷

Jock Young has argued that whereas 'delinquent youth culture' is centred on leisure because its members are marginal to the labour market in terms of skills and opportunities, bohemian youth culture is centred on leisure because its members have deliberately rejected the rewards of work:

Like the delinquent he focuses his life on leisure, but unlike the former his dissociation is a matter of choice rather than a realistic bowing to the inevitable. Moreover, his disdain for society is of an articulate and ideological nature. He evolves social theories which uphold subterranean values as authentic guides to action, and which attempt to solve the problem of the domination of the ethos of productivity.²⁸

Music had a special importance for hippie culture ('pop music is an essential element of the "underground" and a central preoccupation of most adolescent hippie groups') and because of its ideology, hippie rock was more than just hippie music by adoption. In Richard Mills's words, music was given a 'missionary purpose', it could carry hippie values into the heart of the commercial beast, it could spread

the ubiquitous notion of 'turning on', the sudden intuition, the transcending of rational standards and structured judgements – there was mystical illumination or there was nothing – and the

explicit linking of mental and physical dimensions – to be ‘smiling and bopping about and not questioning, to know what it is to be alive’.

In seeking to transform the experience and use of rock music, hippie culture also sought to transform its production: for hippie groups music came out of the community, the distinction between performer and audience was blurred even in the experience of performance – music was an experience of community as well as its expression:

Pop groups thus held a key position within the culture. They helped minister and uphold that experience of transformation which underlay it, provided the forms and rituals through which its goals and values found expression, and, in the process, established the minimal degree of social and economic organisation necessary to sustain them. All these factors gave them a position of leadership which partly strengthened, and partly itself flowed from, their final role, that of negotiating between the different realities of the hip and the straight.²⁹

In the long run this role, as missionaries in the commercial world, proved almost impossible for hippie musicians to sustain. In California, where hippie ideology was most powerful, the violence of the Altamont Festival of 1969 was taken as the final sign that a community could not be based on music use alone – the world of the hip could only be the world of the commercial hip. Nevertheless, in a more politicised form, the hippie argument still inspires many a struggling revolutionary rock band.³⁰

My purpose at this stage is not to criticise the hippie ideology of music but to suggest that in sub-cultural theory the hippies’ articulate use of rock as a symbol of leisure, an expression of the opposition to the ‘ethos of productivity’, is taken to be an example of the use of music that is made by all youth sub-cultures. But the hippies really did have an ideology of leisure; their music was created to express a worked-out position. Their position can be directly contrasted to that of, say, the teds.

In his detailed empirical study of teddy boys Fyvel points out that if music is teenagers’ ‘most vivid link with contemporary culture’, for teds it was the only area where they were ‘at one’ with society: ‘tunes are the one subject where you can be sure of getting them to talk’. Fyvel suggests that ‘his love for pop music appears to be the chink in the teddy boy’s armour of non-participation’. If teds were against hard work and getting on:

Youth and music

55

Sweat and toil to learn music is one of the few exceptions. A boy willing to devote every day to practice in a band is not derided for his pains. Even in the toughest Ted circles, musical ambition is generally regarded as legitimate.

This echoes Mills's comments on the hippie musician negotiating between the hip and the straight, but the hippie was armed with an ideology, the teddy boy was not: rock'n'roll wasn't a symbol of the teddy boys' independence but of their continued dependence on the world of the teenage consumer.³¹

In my survey of Keighley it was clear that music was important as a symbolic expression of values only for those young people who were rejecting their given class cultures, whether middle-class pupils rejecting academic success or working-class pupils rejecting the street, and the 'hairies' equally rejected the values of commerce. In his study of working-class boys in London Willmott described 'another kind of rebel' than the traditional criminal deviant:

He was alone, playing records by Billie Holiday and Miles Davis. He says of his parents, 'They couldn't understand me in a hundred years. Like most ordinary East End people, their idea of living is to have a steady job and settle down with a nice little wife in a nice little house or flat, doing the same things every day of your life. They think the sorts of thing I do are mad.' What sort of things? 'Well, I might decide to take the day off and go up the park and sit and meditate. Or go round my friend's pad for an all-night session. A group of us drink whisky and smoke tea and talk about what's happiness and things like that.' He says that he and his friends regularly take Purple Hearts too: 'It may seem sinful to some people. But we're just young people who like to enjoy ourselves and forget the Bomb.' He reads Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin – 'That's the sort of thing I dig. I suppose I'm really searching.'

Willmott makes the point that such 'rebels' were rare in his sample, but their importance for rock (and rock's importance for them) must not be underestimated, nor can the use of music involved simply be explained as an expression of a middle-class sub-culture. Anyone who grew up in the 1960s knows the importance of such local 'hip' figures, not just in turning us on to blues and politics and poetry, but also in acting as the link between the culturally adventurous of both classes. From this group (particularly from its creatively successful version in art colleges) came the majority of British rock musicians.³²

Ironically, it is also this group which, excluded from most