

Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series

An **Ashgate** Book

White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock

Matthew Bannister

WHITE BOYS, WHITE NOISE:
MASCULINITIES AND 1980s INDIE GUITAR ROCK



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

First published 2006 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

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Bannister, Matthew

White boys, white noise : masculinities and 1980s Indie

guitar rock. – (Ashgate popular and folk music series)

1. Alternative rock music – History and criticism 2. Masculinity 3. Men, White – Songs and music

I. Title

781.6'08909

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bannister, Matthew.

White boys, white noise : masculinities and 1980s indie guitar rock / Matthew

Bannister

p. cm.—(Ashgate popular and folk music series)

ISBN 0-7546-5188-6 (hardback : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-7546-5190-8 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Alternative rock music—History and criticism. 2. Masculinity in music.

I. Title. II. Series.

ML3534.B316 2006

781.66—dc22

2005026457

ISBN 9780754651888 (hbk)

ISBN 9780754651901 (pbk)

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* aims to present the best research in the field. Authors will be concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and may draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series will focus on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

Professor Derek B. Scott
Chair of Music
University of Salford

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks and love to my wife, Alice Bulmer, who read and commented on the manuscript and checked references, and my supportive family. Thanks also to Stephen Turner and Edmund King, who read some chapters, and the English Department at the University of Auckland for giving me a place to work. Nabeel Zuberi and Vicky Bogle supplied helpful ideas, suggestions and resources. Finally, I'd like to thank Michael Azerrad, for obvious reasons!

Introduction

White boys ...

The words ‘masculinity’ and ‘rock and roll’ commonly conjure screaming, hip-swivelling singers, virtuosos with medallions banging on their hairy chests and an electric guitar glued to their hips, groupies, sex and drugs – the whole 1970s, decadent, Spinal Tap trip. This book is about indie guitar rock, a 1980s musical genre that eschewed many of the conventional models of rock machismo, resulting, some have claimed, in a more ‘enlightened’ male sexuality (DeRogatis, 1996, pp. 13–14; Gilbert, 1999, pp. 44–5; Grajeda, 2002, pp. 242–4). But I am going to argue that this is not the case.

If you’re a ‘straight white man’ writing about (mostly) straight white masculinity, people ‘tend to assume you’re either gonna whomp ’em or join ’em’ (Pfeil, 1995, p. viii). There is a regrettable tendency to view ‘white men’ as monolithic, missing the point that if gender is socially constructed, then that applies just as much to the ‘dominant’ group as any other. As such it would be easy for me to write a ‘whomping’ book about rock machismo, missing a sense of my personal investment and aspiring to an objectivity that is actually part of the problem.

The (valuable) oddness of the idea of men studying themselves is too easy to downplay in conventional academic discourse, which favours an abstract and quasi-objective lexicon. It behoves men studying masculinities not to hide behind pseudo-scientific detachment, because the implied set of power relations are the very ones which we are supposed to be questioning. The problem of subjective positioning in masculinities studies may be compounded by class differences between academics and their (usually working-class or somehow other) subjects which may result in a condescending ‘gaze’ that obscures the differences between ‘at least two very different masculine possibilities: one physically aggressive, “macho” and overtly aggressive; the other ... uptight, emotionally inhibited and fastidiously devoid of affect’ (Ehrenreich, 1983, p. 133). Perhaps this latter category is a little too close for comfort, but if indie is primarily about ‘young White men ... aspiring to the class of salaried intellectuals ... uncomfortable with the conventional gendered identities offered by the dominant strands of popular culture’ (Gilbert, 1999, p. 44) then perhaps it is time to look more closely at this second model, whose modes of power and control are not mainly physical and bodily but abstract, indirect and intellectual.

I want to suggest that overemphasis on the first has tended to obscure the ways that both serve masculine hegemony in popular music. Intersecting with these themes is my account of migrating from Scotland to New Zealand, from a middle-class intellectual culture to a more ‘egalitarian’ and ‘pragmatic’ one, the resultant

culture shock, playing 'indie' rock music, and the interconnections and discontinuities between different discourses of masculinity as I experienced them.

In the 1980s, I was involved in NZ alternative rock as a musician, performer and songwriter. Accordingly, I have a particular interest in musical production and musicians, an area which some suggest has been neglected in pop music studies (Toynbee, 2000a, pp. ix–x). But every musician is also a consumer and an audience, and most have a voracious appetite for pop music culture – the music press, critics, TV, radio, film and so on. Hence I have drawn extensively on such popular discourse as well as on more academic and theoretical work, believing both to be indispensable resources of ideas and possibilities. I was attending university throughout most of my band career, and have always regarded my musical and academic work as parts of a whole. As such I am equally disposed to find value in mass and high culture, a distinction I have never really recognised. Mozart or the Sex Pistols? I really wouldn't like to choose.

As regards my interest in gender, my family background is relevant. I grew up in a middle-class household in Scotland. My parents came from lower-middle- to working-class backgrounds, but had taken university degrees in science. We were an 'upwardly mobile', nuclear family, living far away from our extended families. My father, a 'scholarship boy', had few male friends, worked hard (as an academic) and left the emotional and practical management of family affairs to my mother (Hoggart, 1957, p. 238). Hence I grew up lacking contact and interaction with men, a problem exacerbated by my father's illness with cancer, which he contracted when I was seven. I poured my energies into schoolwork, and intellectual achievement became the main index of my self-esteem, soaring or plummeting according to how I did in examinations. I found more immediate pleasure and diversion in media like radio, TV and books. Unsanctioned (although not prevented) by my parents I developed an interest in pop music, initially through a couple of Beatles records they owned, which I extended into a collection through Christmas and birthday presents, and through radio and TV. At the age of 15 I bought an acoustic guitar and started learning to play. I had few male role models, but The Beatles (especially John Lennon) and the idea of rock and roll stardom were hugely important to me as a fantasy escape from my circumstances (plus I surmised, for once correctly, that rock music would improve my love life). I spent long hours in my bedroom, playing along with my record collection. In 1978 my father accepted a professorship of botany at the University of Otago in Dunedin, and after completing my higher level examinations I moved to New Zealand as a 17-year-old in 1979.

In Dunedin I combined university studies in English with playing, writing and singing in a band called Sneaky Feelings, who recorded for NZ independent Flying Nun, and were part of what was called 'the Dunedin Sound' (Mitchell, 1996, pp. 223–35; Shuker, 1998, pp. 103–4). Between 1980 and 1989 we recorded three albums and three EPs and played several hundred gigs, mostly in New Zealand, though we also toured Europe twice and released records there through

Flying Nun Europe and Normal Records in Germany. Such activities did not occur in a vacuum – bands of mostly white men playing guitars, referencing the 1960s and recording for independent labels were part of a much larger cultural movement towards ‘indie’ music making that was occurring throughout the Western English-speaking world (see Chapter 3 on genre).

I still play music, although I haven’t released any records for some years now (the last was *Present Perfect* with my second band, Dribbling Darts of Love (1993)). As such, I have a lot of experience in popular music scenes, which could be deemed participant observation, although this implies a degree of choice and purpose that I am only constructing in retrospect. But in many ways I was also an alien – as a recent arrival to New Zealand from the UK, I was a ‘stranger in a strange land’.

Gender was the locus of my alienation in my new environment. Masculinity is visibly hegemonic in ‘pioneer’ societies like the western USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, where the ‘frontier’ spirit still provides a kind of national mythology, based around masculinity. In New Zealand it’s ‘the Kiwi bloke’, a working-class, tough, pragmatic, sporty, ‘matey’, anti-intellectual type (Law, Campbell, Schick, 1999, p. 15; Phillips, 1987). New Zealand culture initially seemed to me to be male dominated and intellectually moribund. Women seemed to be virtually excluded from many areas of public life. Sport, especially rugby, was far more dominant than in Britain. There were few mixed-sex leisure activities. I moved from a Scottish comprehensive mixed-sex education to an NZ boys’ school (which I hated). I was ill-equipped to perform the types of masculinity that seemed to be valued in NZ society. For me, music represented a potential way out of my immediate life-circumstances. However, I soon discovered that it was an unreliable means of transcendence – rather it forced me to engage more closely and painfully with the culture that I was trying to get away from. Moreover, although the local music scene resisted many aspects of the dominant culture, it also reproduced much of its ‘blokey’ homosociality, albeit under cover of a more bohemian style.

Craig Robertson’s study of the Dunedin Sound characterises it as based around punk – not ‘fashion’ punk (based on appearance) but rather its DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos (1991, p. 19). The scene was marked by a ‘family atmosphere’, a lack of division between audience and performer, valuing ‘dirty’ over clean art, and simplicity over complexity (pp. 39, 35–6, 49). Bands like mine were excluded because they ‘lacked the drive or energy’ and were more musically complex (pp. 43–4). There was implicit ideological conflict about which values were dominant in constructions of local music. Robertson claims that the main Dunedin scene valued an extemporised approach – ‘just doing it’ – and devalued theoretical constructions (p. 9). This amateur, anti-intellectual approach also resonated with the local masculine pioneer ethos of egalitarianism and DIY – hence Robertson’s reading may in fact be influenced by aspects of the dominant culture, something we also see in US indie scenes, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Whereas in Britain there was and is a proliferation of media discourses about popular music, in 1980s New Zealand such engagement was rare in the public

domain, and risked dismissal as mere ‘trainspotting’ (Reid, 2001). There were few music publications, and discussion of popular culture (apart from sport) risked social censure. Interest in culture was a secret you only shared with those you trusted. In itself it was not sufficient basis for friendship, and discussing it with a ‘stranger’ risked humiliation or being branded as eccentric, underlining how music consumption and associated activities such as collecting can be seen as ‘feminising’ for men, especially in a strongly homosocial culture (Straw, 1997a, p. 7).

Superficially the music scene in Dunedin was slightly more sexually integrated than other aspects of New Zealand society. Women formed a substantial minority of the audience, and played in some bands, but tended to drop out as bands became better known and started touring. In our case, we fired our female bass player (see Chapter 4). There were no female bands and only a few performers in the Dunedin scene until Look Blue Go Purple in 1983–84. This male-dominated rock culture was not simply based on numerical advantage. It was also enforced ideologically. Pop music was for girls and rock music – the real stuff – was for boys. What kind of rock you liked depended on what kind of man you were: Pink Floyd, Dire Straits, the Eagles, Supertramp, Genesis and Bruce Springsteen was the ‘blokey’ music that was usually played by covers bands and local radio stations, while practitioners of the Dunedin Sound touted an alternative canon based on punk and its antecedents. There was no place for modern pop music or mainstream rock in the Dunedin scene:

In a small town like Dunedin, or a small country like New Zealand, there is only room for one dominant culture and a subculture. In musical terms this meant choosing between Dire Straits and some kind of weird bohemian punk approach. My problem was, I didn’t totally hate Dire Straits. (Bannister, 1999, p. 23)

Sneaky Feelings liked pop music, and never felt committed to the idea of an underground bohemia, or a musical avant-garde, central to many accounts of alternative music (Arnold, 1995, pp. 4–11; Azerrad, 2001, p. 3; Nehring, 1993).¹ Pop music, dancing and discos were central aspects of youth culture in Scotland, but my experience of social activities around music in New Zealand was totally different (Cavanagh, 2000, p. 24). Disco music was beyond the pale. I never saw another male musician dancing at a gig or other social function. Such behaviour would have been regarded as effeminate, and could make you the target of violence (Churton, 2000, p. 79; Reynolds, 1990, p. 79). Again, this conflict between pop and rock, between mainstream and alternative ideas of music making, was also a feature of indie scenes more generally (see Chapter 3). But Sneaky Feelings did not consciously buy into any discourse of oppositional ‘cool’.

Pubs were the immediate level at which rock bands had to negotiate a relationship with socially dominant conceptions of masculinity based around drinking and sport, and dominant ideologies of music making in relation to audiences. A measure of my naivety in this respect – I once walked into a pub and asked for a

gig, wearing my school uniform. Live popular music and the brewing industry are/were closely related in New Zealand, as pubs provide the main venues and income for most popular musicians. Pub bands typically stuck to covers: chart hits or accepted classic rock like Fleetwood Mac, the Eagles or possibly heavy metal that a primarily male audience would accept, hence pub rock – loud, aggressive music played by loud aggressive men, preferably with a suitably impressive PA and lightshow.² The music had to be fast, loud and competent so the audience could ‘rage’ (drink more) and dance if they got drunk enough. Blues was the only acceptable ‘ethnic’ music. Pub owners initially resisted Dunedin Sound bands because of their perceived amateurism, but this diminished a little once they had been proven to attract large audiences (not usually heavy-drinking audiences, regrettably for the publicans). The alternative rock approach wasn’t too far removed from pub culture: it was reasonably loud, aggressive and had plenty of fast songs – slow or ‘sensitive’ material was generally sneered at.

Since wimpy pop songs were what Sneaky Feelings specialised in, pubs were less than ideal venues for us. Once we had a popular record out, and played more outside Dunedin, we started to get more recognition. But we never lost the sense that we were somehow slightly eccentric, and we were always under pressure to prove ourselves. Punk veteran Chris Knox (The Enemy, Toy Love, Tall Dwarfs), as Flying Nun’s self-appointed ‘Jiminy Cricket’ (male superego?), frequently badgered us about our musical direction (*Heavenly Pop Hits*, 2002; Bannister, 1999, pp. 67–8, 84, 100, 160–61). Also, as Flying Nun developed, it continued to be identified and evaluated in terms of a similar aesthetic to that espoused by Robertson, a sonic orthodoxy closely allied to alternative rock mores, that is, ‘the Dunedin Sound’. Our most popular records (notably *Send You*, 1984) conformed closely to this punk/indie guitar rock model (Robertson, 1991, pp. 35–6, 39, 49).

In 1991 Flying Nun confirmed our paranoia by releasing a ten-year label retrospective (*Getting Older*) in which no Sneaky Feelings tracks were included. Many of the anthologised bands had also broken up, and others were pretty obscure. Moreover, I was still involved with the label with the Dribbling Darts of Love (who weren’t included either). The incident ultimately motivated me to write *Positively George Street* (Bannister, 1999), the first and only book about the Dunedin Sound, but also my revisionist attempt to prevent us being written out of NZ musical history altogether. However, it wasn’t just a question of our not fitting into the NZ scene – by the early 1990s Flying Nun was selling as many records overseas as at home, and was increasingly involved in the global indie scene. Sneaky Feelings did not fit into the way indie developed as a genre, because the overall trajectory was away from ‘indie pop’ and towards rock. While in the early 1980s there were groups like Orange Juice, The Go-Betweens and R.E.M. with whom we had something in common, they either broke up or went mainstream. We were in no position to make this jump, so we gradually got more disillusioned and sidelined.

To put it crudely, the music gradually got louder and more distorted, and bands that didn’t follow this style gradually got squeezed out. Presumably such stylistic

extremism was originally a way of preserving 'difference', but this very point of difference became a marketing tool with the post-Nirvana 'explosion' and proliferation of 'modern/alternative rock' radio, based around white boy guitar performers and audiences (Goodlad, 2003). Record companies are often blamed for commercialisation of local scenes, but I contend that indie's insistence on 'autonomy', its policing of difference, its dedication to being alternative are actually part of a larger discourse of how the resistance/incorporation paradigm works to confirm hegemonic values (Carrabine and Longhurst, 1999, pp. 125–8). Rather than viewing music subcultures or countercultures only in terms of resistance then, I would see them as also reproducing dominant social structures, especially in terms of gender.

So far I've suggested some ways in which a local, dominant masculinity was reproduced and represented in the local indie music scene. However, masculinity is also part of *my* subjectivity. So it might be more apt to see the foregoing as a conflict between two different sets of cultural values – that of pakeha (white) NZ society and that of my British middle-class background – and to perhaps work into my argument the idea that indie represented more than one set of masculine possibilities.³

Masculinities are articulated differently in different socio-cultural contexts. Britain, like New Zealand, is a patriarchal society, but social class is a much greater preoccupation than gender. For me, class meant that the kinds of tough working-class machismo that existed in Scotland – the 'bovver boys' and 'hard men', for example – did not exert the same hegemonic force that comparable masculinities did in New Zealand. Certainly, growing up in Scotland, I was afraid of their physical and sporting prowess. But it didn't matter that much, because I was middle class and believed that in the long run society supported *my* values: my intellectual and imaginative abilities, values nurtured in my home life (academic parents) and in the Scottish education system. Pakeha New Zealand clearly didn't value intellect in the same way. I was the 'New Chum': an intellectual and aesthetic young man of 'refined' sensibilities, comically incongruous in a rough pioneering society (Phillips, 1987, p. 24). Hence New Zealand is not necessarily a more masculine or patriarchal society than the UK – it simply identifies masculinity in different ways. For the 'Kiwi bloke', masculinity is bodily; but my masculinity was in my head.

In the UK there was more emphasis on music as an intellectual pursuit, but this does not mean that it was therefore less masculine. Rather it was a different kind of masculinity: activities of record collecting, debates about the composition of the 'canon'; music 'connoisseurship', exchange and hoarding of information – all provide spaces for masculine identity formation (Straw, 1997a, p. 5). My preliminary suggestion here is that indie provided a space where some men could assert masculinity indirectly by participating in a kind of objective order or symbolic system of authority in which rank is determined by subjectively held notions of taste and knowledge: or as one of Nick Hornby's characters puts it, the relative

importance to men of ‘what you like’ as opposed to ‘what you’re like’ (Hornby, 1995, p. 222). Within this sphere of taste, allied with a certain aestheticism, some men can create a space where their subjectivity is defined through the hierarchisation and ordering of musical knowledge and experience. The kind of cultural capital they possess is relatively marginal to society as a whole – it is indeed more like subcultural capital, but it may present a potential means for long-term advancement (see Chapters 2 and 5).

Contextualising indie

To understand any cultural movement occurring in the 1980s such as indie, we need to look in some detail at the social circumstances of youth (especially male youth): political and economic hegemony; demographics – the GenX hypothesis; relevant social and intellectual change (for example, identity politics) and cultural attitudes. The 1970s had seen the gradual collapse of a long-term post-war social contract: a neo-Keynesian compact between the government, business and the unions in which state intervention was justified in terms of discourses of protectionism for local industries, tax breaks and mediation between (often compulsory) unions and business to achieve incremental pay increases tied to inflation, a period and ideology variously termed the post-war consensus in the UK (and the USA) and in NZ history ‘the historic compromise’ (Jesson, 1989, p. 17; Kavanagh, 1990, pp. 6–14). The increasing power of multinationals, globalisation, the oil crisis, the hegemony of international financial markets, the replacement of fixed with floating exchange rates, and balance of payments crises paved the way for massive restructuring, privatisation, budget cutting and rationalisation – Thatcherism (UK), Reaganism (USA) and Rogernomics (NZ). Cradle-to-grave socialism was now officially dead, and consensus and inclusion gave way to rampant individualism and social hierarchisation. As government subsidies and tariff fences disappeared, multinationals moved primary production to the Second World. Full-time labouring and heavy industry jobs decreased; service and information industries and labour casualisation grew (Faludi, 1999, p. 39; Rutherford, 1988, pp. 23–4).

Traditional models of ‘grunt’ (working-class) masculinity were looking increasingly vulnerable. Susan Faludi writes in *Stiffed* of the Long Beach shipyard, once a huge naval shipyard, employing tens of thousands, and the consequences of downsizing and privatising on its male workforce. She sees ‘a social pact between the nation’s men and its institutions collapsing ... masculine ideals of loyalty, productivity and service lay in shards’ (1999, p. 43). US indie bands like the Minutemen, who hail from San Pedro, just around the corner from Long Beach, arose from this context – they, like many US indie musicians, came from military families, and the privatisation and restructuring of the US military industry had profound social effects (Azerrad, 2001, pp. 62–63; Faludi, 1999, pp. 51–74). Not everyone accepts Faludi’s argument, however: James Heartfield

(2002) states that 'the crisis is not one of masculinity, but one of the working-class'. However, economic change did not only affect the working class. The shrinking of the state and growth of the private sector also removed traditional middle-class work, for example public service jobs. Many moved into the private sector and became 'yuppies', but others attempted to reject hegemonic values, practising 'a carefully modulated distancing from the cues and signals of ... consumer culture' (Rushkoff, 1994, p. 5). To sum up, one might say that for a significant number of people, and especially perhaps young adults, the 1980s signalled a sense of betrayal, crisis, insecurity and a worsening of their lives (Marsh, 1985, p. 1). As such, there was a tendency to either idealise the immediate past as a magical prelapsarian moment which contrasted favourably with contemporary trials and tribulations or denigrate it as a cause of present problems, and one of the main focuses was the 1960s.

Groups from all parts of the social and political spectrum lined up to take a shot at the 1960s, and especially at its most visible manifestation – the counterculture. Punk rock got in first with its denunciation of 'old hippies', a theme essentially continued in GenX's targeting of 'boomer culture'. Even 'the indie community saw what had happened to the Sixties dream ... the baby boomers' egregious sellout' (Azerrad, 2001, p. 7). But the Right also laid into the 1960s counterculture's supposed excess and moral slackness, blaming it for a culture of state hand-outs, personal narcissism and drug-addled self-indulgence, and using this to justify neo-liberal economic reform (MacDonald, 1998, pp. 1–4). The universality of this derision is nicely summed up in the figure of Neil, the pariah hippy of 1980s cult UK TV series *The Young Ones*, who is considered fair game by punks, yuppies and wide boys alike.

Geoffrey Holtz (1995, p. 2) claims that the introduction of birth control in 1960 marks a sea change in how American society viewed children, fuelled by the 'boomer' 1960s countercultural emphasis on individual and sexual freedom, and subsequent 1970s fears of population explosion. Rising rates of divorce, mothers' increased workforce participation and the commercialisation of childcare supposedly led to increased parental neglect and absence (1995, pp. 25–7, 33–7, 42–3). Accordingly, Holtz argues that the early 1970s saw a demonisation of children in popular culture, literally in films like *The Omen* and *Rosemary's Baby*, more subtly in *Bugsy Malone*, and the sexualisation of young girls (*Taxi Driver*, for example) (pp. 15, 22). Holtz suggests that the subtext was that kids were every bit as powerful and scary as adults; hence perhaps they didn't need parents to look after them. Rob Latham argues that this change in attitude towards youth is tied to the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. Youth moved from being the ideal symbol of mass consumption towards images of youth consumption as pathological – dependence, morbidity, halted growth, aberrant reproduction: 'a symptom of a malaise of a system that conceives only one role for youth – the idleness and hedonism of consumption – but then indicts them for enacting it' (Latham, 2002, p. 74). 'In the transition to post-Fordism, the vampire proved a remarkably flexible metaphor for

capturing the general cultural ambivalence regarding youth consumption' (2002, p. 70). The George Romero-directed 1976 vampire flick *Martin*, which, as the title suggests, offers a sympathetic portrait of a contemporary white male urban teenager (who just happens to be a vampire) 'may be seen as pioneering the figure of the slacker ... compulsive yet affectless, media-obsessed ... living in a world self-fashioned out of the scattered detritus of consumer culture' (2002, pp. 75–6).

Of course, every generation likes to imagine it has a uniquely hard childhood, and perhaps this is because of a basic truth – children have few rights and therefore tend to become the guinea pigs of whatever ideologies and social conditions they are born into. If nothing else, Holtz's 'generation that raised itself' (1995, p. 7) has at least an equal claim to other generations. But the real problem here lies not with any one social group or subculture, but rather with broader processes of social change from modernity to post- or late modernity, from Fordism to post-Fordism: the transformation, as McLuhan (1964, p. 11) would have it, from the mechanical, industrial age of still slightly deferred gratification into the electronic, post-industrial, instantaneous present. The legacy of the 1960s is too complex to be simply dismissed or vilified, and thus Holtz's tendency to 'blame the boomers' needs some qualification. Ian MacDonald, prefacing his work on The Beatles, points out that if the ambitions of the 1960s counterculture 'had really been so irrelevant and impractical, why such resentment at [their] supposed failure to realise them?' (1998, p. 2). Gina Arnold states on behalf of the US indie community: 'we were too ashamed of the fate of hippy idealism to recognise our actual allegiance to it' (1995, p. 170). The music and ideologies of the 1960s act as key reference points for 1980s alternative music. Michael Azerrad claims in his survey of 1980s US indie rock that 'virtually every artist in this book acknowledges the influence of the Sixties musical counterculture' (2001, p. 7) because of its perceived idealism about music as a way of life. The other obvious point here is that any study of indie needs to be historical – the music and popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s are highly significant influences on indie, and will be examined extensively. Finally, the 1960s also offered an idealised vision of youthful innocence that resonated strongly with some white teenagers who perhaps felt that they had never really had the chance to be children, leading towards a consideration of infantilism and childlike regression in indie culture (see Chapter 6).

The Swedish authors of *In Garageland*, a study of 1980s local rock bands and society, state that 'the 1960s bought about a new phase of modernity, a radicalised, extended and deepened *late modernity* that penetrated ever deeper into the everyday life of more and more people' (Fornäs et al., 1995, p. 150). If modernity is defined in terms of a shift in the articulation of authority from direct to indirect forms (from parental authority and tradition to state intervention and the hegemony of mass culture, for example) then late modernity accelerates that process, leading towards the radically atomised and privatised society we live in today (Benjamin, 1978, pp. 35–6; Giddens, 1990, pp. 140–41; Weber, 1970, pp. 15–16): 'band members['] lives] ... were stamped by a new kind of uncertainty and a ...

chronic awareness of crisis' (Fornäs et al., 1995, p. 151). Typically more distanced from their families (particularly their fathers), authority and traditional values about work and sexuality, they develop identities more in engagement with school, popular culture, media and in bands, which act as a bridge between childhood and adulthood (1995, pp. 190–97, 201–6). The authors conclude that 'if identity was formerly something you grew into ... today it is something you have to acquire' (p. 207). In other words, identity is not given; it must be continuously fashioned and re-fashioned out of materials, including media.

John Lennon was my father

It is not hard for me to interpret my own upbringing in terms of such a model: a nuclear family system, pretty thoroughly disembedded from tradition and community, identification with mediated models of authority (teachers, public achievement through exams and eventually career); consumption of media: books, TV, music, a heavily mediated engagement with the world. Although I was always materially provided for, my parents were too busy working to spend a lot of time with me – basically I was entrusted to the Scottish education system, which, fortunately, was designed to coddle quiet, clever, middle-class white boys. In Nick Hornby's books, male identification with pop culture relates to a family background based around a literally or emotionally absent father and a stressed-out, emotionally overburdened mother (although my mother was certainly not ineffectual, and was a decisive influence on my own gender politics). My idea of masculinity was shaped mostly by my mediated identification with popular culture heroes (representations), but also by the sense that education and popular culture were systems in the public arena where I could 'belong', a kind of imagined community, on the one hand, but also a public space where I could potentially gain power, by 'being someone'.

Identity in modernity is no longer something we necessarily get from family, community and tradition, because our experience of them is now fragmented and disjointed. My childhood was marked by the moves undertaken as my father pursued his career, first within Scotland, and then when I was 17, to New Zealand. In such a dislocating succession of environments, my involvement with media, and especially music, provided me with a sorely needed sense of continuity, as it did for many. In the late 1970s and early 1980s then, a generation of young men came to adulthood whose primary identifications of masculinity were with mass-mediated representations of sportsmen, TV stars and pop musicians. Such identifications must contain strong elements of fantasy and instability, uncorrected by real-life interactions. Lacking a strong sense of traditional identification, but also disillusioned with the institutional alternatives (social and career opportunities), many were drifting, lacking any clear sense of a role or a future, continuing to live at home, watching reruns of 1960s TV and children's programming. This was

‘dole culture’ – in the UK and New Zealand, unemployment benefits offered the only stable source of income, promoting a rather self-pitying state of mind summed up in Dunedin band The Chills’ ‘Doledrums’:

Counting down lonely hours
Drinking lots and taking showers
I no longer dream about the rest of my years
I’ll check the letterbox – does anyone care?
In the doldrums
On the dole
In the doldrums
On the dole

(The Chills, 1986)

As someone who spent much of the late 1980s on benefit myself, I can attest to the authenticity of the feelings described above.

Feminism and men

The 1960s were also ‘a moment when the enlargement of capitalism on a global scale simultaneously produced an immense freeing or unbinding of social energies, a prodigious release of untheorised new forces: ... ethnic forces ... the development of new and militant bearers of “surplus consciousness” in the student and women’s movements, as well as in a host of struggles of other kinds’ (Jameson, 1988, p. 208). One consequence of the 1960s celebration of individuality and nonconformity was that some oppressed social groups – women, gays and ethnic minorities – started organising themselves and making a claim for their right to be individuals too. Holtz (1995, p. 21) suggests that early feminism’s rejection of motherhood and claiming of contraception and abortion rights reproduced this new emphasis on self-fulfilment, in which traditional roles like motherhood were seen as oppressive – ‘down with childhood’ (Firestone, 1970, p. 81). Basically, women were claiming the right to be like men – independent. The emphasis was reproduced in the early feminist emphasis on individual and personal rights – most specifically the right to freedom from personal oppression by male violence, coercion and sexualisation.

Feminism’s critique of male power was hugely significant (after all, ‘masculinities’ as a subject would not exist without it), but its initial concentration on male sexual deviance and physical violence, which remains central to popular conceptions of what ‘sexism’ is, often had the effect of objectifying masculinity in the form of a male underclass – it was implicitly a middle-class critique of a primitive masculinity driven by base desires to control and dominate (especially sexually) (Millet, 1970). Such polemical simplification, while necessary, provided little understanding of the complexity of patriarchy. As Faludi comments on a counsel-

ling group for violent men: 'there was something almost absurd about these men struggling ... to recognise themselves as dominators when they were so clearly dominated, done in by the world' (1999, p. 9). She continues: 'the popular feminist joke that men are to blame for everything is just the flip side of the family values reactionary expectation that men should be in charge of everything' (pp. 9–10). As such, there were some strange alliances between feminists and reactionary social groups, over censorship, for example (Segal, 1990, pp. 207–8, 221–2, 226–7).

These debates were very much to the fore in the early 1980s at Otago University, forming part of the ideological context in which Dunedin Sound bands operated. Despite Robertson's claims that the Dunedin Sound distanced itself from the university, many band members were the offspring of university staff, for example myself, Martin Durrant (Sneaky Feelings), Martin Phillipps, Jane Dodd, Terry Moore (The Chills, Verlaines, Bored Games) and Jonathan Moore (Bored Games) or were students (Bruce Russell, Alister Galbraith, Graeme Downes, Kat Tyrie, David Pine) (Robertson, 1991, p. 42). The university also offered paying gigs and media exposure. Accordingly, there was an awareness of the undesirability of 'un-PC' behaviour – the stereotype of 'grunt' masculinity and its associated 'cock rock', 'sexist' or 'rockist' clichés of the type identified in contemporary texts like Frith and McRobbie's 'Rock and Sexuality' (1990, p. 373) and the *NME*. This distinction was mainly defined in class terms – Dunedin Sound bands all hailed from North Dunedin, the middle-class, university end of town. South Dunedin was the home of heavy metal, hot rods, hot dogs and 'scarfy bashers' – drunken 'hoons' and 'bodgies' who cruised the streets around the 'Varsity', looking for students to attack. Student politics and publishing at the Varsity were dominated by left-wing politicians who periodically lambasted a generally apathetic student body about sexism and racism.

Early men's movements on campus like Men Against Sexism took feminist critique to heart and largely defined masculinity in terms of a feminist view of men as violent abusers (Rutherford, 1988, pp. 25–31). NZ masculinities scholar Kai Jensen suggests, from his involvement, that such groups were primarily 'male supporters of feminism' (1996, p. 5) – as the formula suggests, a somewhat thankless task. Any preoccupation with masculinity was seen as patriarchal. The paradox was that the forms of sexism such groups addressed often had little connection with their own lived realities. This highlighted a problem with early feminist definitions of patriarchy as unchanging and ahistorical: 'The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms' (Butler, 2000, p. 309). What was needed was recognition that masculinity is also a social construct. My own involvement in men's groups (from the mid-1990s onwards) is detailed in Chapter 1.

Gender and writing on indie rock

Popular music has always been closely linked to changing social attitudes to sex and gender. In the 1950s, rock and roll reintroduced the male body into a culture that increasingly objectified sexuality as female. Attali claims that music has a 'prophetic' function: 'Every major social rupture has been preceded by an essential mutation in the codes of music' (1985, pp. 10–11). The glamorisation and objectification of male bodies and associated concepts of the 'New Man' now widespread in consumer culture seem to owe a big debt to popular music and associated media, especially the glamour, androgyny and self-conscious artifice of 1980s New Pop (Culture Club, ABC, Duran Duran, Human League), which, in many ways, indie rock was reacting against (Reynolds, 1985; Rutherford, 1988, pp. 32–42). New Pop discourses were mainly concerned to demonstrate how post-modernism, poststructuralism and postfeminism as manifested in MTV, Madonna, Prince and digital sampling celebrated a shiny new androgynous semiotic wonderland, where continuous self-invention through artifice and intertextual pastiche erased sexual difference, problematised authorship and created polysemic and polysexual possibilities. Rock was dead. US critics soberly marked the end of Grossberg's 'rock formation', wondering if that was a good thing (Grossberg, 1994, pp. 43–5).

Alternative guitar rock (see Chapter 3) was not much written about at the time, partly because it wasn't commercially successful, and because in the early 1980s guys with guitars were passé, even 'rockist' (Frith and Horne, 1987, pp. 177–8). But increasingly UK music weeklies were targeting a young white male demographic who saw such a retro move as the most appropriate reaction to the intensely image-conscious, status-obsessed times (Davies, 1996, pp. 125–6). More recently, there has been a small explosion of critical work on the 'genre', mainly since the success of R.E.M., Nirvana and Oasis made such projects commercially viable, but mostly concentrating on individual groups, local or, at most, national scenes. Such work can be seen to confirm narratives of local authenticity or artistic integrity, in contrast to the commercialism and cosmopolitanism of New Pop and MTV (Arnold, 1995; Azerrad, 2001; Bannister, 1999; Buckley, 2002; Cavanagh, 2000; Kruse, 2003; Nichols, 2003; Robertson, 1991; Rogan, 1992). The exceptions (for example DeRogatis, 1996; Felder, 1993; Larkin, 1995; Strong, 1999; Thompson, 2000) tend to take a basically documentary or encyclopaedic approach, offering a lot of information, but not a great deal of useful analysis or criticism. I suggest in Chapter 3, that such studies tend to be predicated on the assumption that alternative music is original, unique, different, non-conformist and independent of the dominant culture.

These commentaries have tended to avoid questions of gender and ethnic representation, partly because the genre is so clearly dominated by white males. This bias also makes the genre a little 'unsexy' for academics, who like to stress the experience of marginalised groups such as women and homosexuals. While I recognise the importance of studying oppressed groups, such studies can reify power