

The Cambridge Companion to

POP AND ROCK

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3 Consumption

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In March of 2000, the head of the United States-based MTV Networks outlined, to a journalist, his techniques for understanding the tastes of teenagers. 'We actually in some cases put people under hypnosis,' said 54-year-old Tom Freston, 'and we will videotape their lives.' As he spoke, albums by teen stars Britney Spears and 'N Sync were breaking all-time records for first-week sales of new titles in the United States. While alarmed rock critics bemoaned the predictability of adolescent tastes, Freston saw teenage culture as an elusive, mysterious world. To understand it, he had recourse to the methods of the psychotherapist and anthropologist.

The consumption of popular music has long been seen as chaotic and incomprehensible, even when it seems to confirm the crudest laws of hype and fashion. While trends seem driven by their own, unstoppable momentum, the popularity of any given recording or musical style is notoriously difficult to predict. Long-term prognoses about the music industry's development have regularly proved wrong, and even the rosiest of cyclical booms will often coincide with predictions of that industry's imminent obsolescence. Alongside the image of millions of consumers rushing to shops to purchase Britney Spears' 'Oops! . . . I Did It Again', newspapers offered the spectre of thousands of United States college students in their dormitories, busily (and perhaps illegally) down-loading songs from the Internet. As album sales, in the United States and other countries, continued their upward climb in 2000, Internet industry newsletters spoke of a dying industry, deserted by consumers who now demanded music in cheaper, more convenient forms.

At the same historical moment, millions of other people were acquiring music through means which escaped easy statistical analysis. Many music retail chains now sell used CDs alongside new product, to compete with the hundreds of second-hand stores which have emerged since the 1980s. Teenagers buy vinyl records from thrift stores or specialty dance music shops, spurred to do so by the demands of the sampler or the disc jockey's turntable. Others make copies of CDs in their homes or offices, trading these with fans met on Internet listservers. On Ebay, the on-line auction site, the number of individual recordings made available on a typical day reaches 250,000 or more. These other ways of consuming music are rarely registered within music industry sales figures or popularity charts.

With so much consumption invisible to the industry's statistical eyes, claims about major shifts in consumption patterns invite suspicion. Did female buyers in the United States really, for the first time, buy more music than males, as the recording industry had announced in 1998? Was rock music dead, dying, or temporarily out of fashion, as dozens of press reports in the late 1990s wondered? Had the percentage of music buyers who were over forty-five years of age really doubled in the 1990s? Or did these statistics only measure the consumption habits of those who continued to acquire music through old-fashioned means (by going to a music shop)? Were the hip connoisseurs of emerging trends now so unlikely to patronise traditional music outlets that their tastes did not register within the industry's official measures of success?

Throughout most of its history, the recording industry has invested little in the analysis of consumer behaviour, preferring to release products, promote them and see how the market responds. In contrast, the commercial broadcasting industries are regularly condemned for 'over-researching' their audiences, cautiously designing their programming to reach narrowly defined demographic segments. Strong ties between the broadcasting and advertising industries have produced an abundance of market research on radio listeners' tastes, given shape by each newly fashionable tool of demographic or psychographic analysis. The recording industry, in contrast, has preferred to invest in what the sociologist Paul Hirsch (1972) once called 'the cooptation of media gate-keepers' (winning over the radio or television programmers, critics and other taste-makers who mediate a new record's entry into the public realm). While radio programmers, in the United States and Canada, will slice fine lines between 'Heritage Alternative Rock' and 'Adult Album Alternative' formats, the recording industry's own consumer profiles lump styles together in broadly defined categories (such as the Recording Industry Association of America's 'R&B/Urban', which includes rhythm and blues, blues, dance, disco, funk, fusion, Motown, reggae, and soul).

Two sorts of images compete to capture the consumption of popular music. One conveys the aggregate effect of millions of consumer choices, as stars or fads emerge and cycles of fashion turn. Here, the consumption of music is a public event, the movement of collective energy across the spaces of media and popular obsession. However such events might be judged, in moral or aesthetic terms, their relationship to the market is easy to grasp. In another image, the consumption of music is private, even secret, forever bumping up against the limits of legality. Popular music's associations with alcohol, with a demi-monde of nightclubs and vice, and with the violation of social taboos have long served to paint its consumers as morally suspect. Recent years have brought the repeated charge that

music's consumers are engaged in the theft of property belonging to others. Controversies over Internet downloading, court challenges to the second-hand or CD-rental markets, and the widespread claim that compact discs are the most commonly stolen of all household items feed the perception that music circulates recklessly in and out of the legal realm. In no other cultural industry are consumers so regularly marked with the stigma of remorseless criminality, or lectured, like United States consumers recently, on the need to pay for music so as to display 'good citizenship'. Here, arguably, we confront one of the most significant paradoxes surrounding popular music and its consumption. Long derided as among the most slavishly malleable of capitalist consumers, fans of popular music are regularly denounced as irresponsible transgressors of a market economy's social contract.

Forms of consumption

We 'consume' music in a variety of ways, of course, many of which do not involve the direct exchange of money. Differences between these kinds of consumption confound our efforts to describe fully music's place in our lives. Music is, much of the time, among the most ubiquitous, easily ignored and trivialised of all cultural forms. It may unfold just beyond our active attention, in the soundtracks to films or the background noise of pubs and restaurants. As Alan Durant (1984) has noted, music seems to enter our ears uninvited, as 'something literally breathed into the body from the air'. This, too, is a way of 'consuming' music, alongside the more spectacularly obsessive ways which make music the centre of attention.

Nevertheless, the ubiquitousness of music has enhanced its social power, by making it one of the most effective markers of public presence and social difference. While books and television are typically consumed in the privacy of our homes, music regularly intrudes upon the variety of spaces in which our lives unfold. In this intrusion, it may well offend, alienate or entice those who hear it, just as it signals the presence of those who have brought it there. The sense that music easily invades the lives of others has helped to give music its political edge, its place in the conflicts of generation, gender, ethnicity and class. Music is important in such conflicts because it compels us to judge the pleasure of others. The music of these others regularly comes across as excessively repetitive or chaotic, loud or innocuous, boring or disruptive. Either side of these oppositions will fuel the perception that the emotional economy of others is distorted relative to a norm, and such perceptions play a prominent role in the stereotyping of race and age. Adult complaints about the loudness of rock or dance

music are, at one level, arguments about the limits of physical tolerance, but they also involve the claim that music has not been kept in its proper place – that a natural hierarchy, in which music would be subservient to conversation, or to the everyday sounds of the street or bar, has been violated. The fanatical devotion to music common among young people is usually seen by their elders as inappropriate, an intensity of attachment to be left behind in the ageing process

We consume music in places of widely varying size and intimacy. Music is heard in mass, large-scale spectacles, like rock concerts, whose enormity is matched only by certain sporting events. In other moments, we listen to music as we read books, in contexts which are solitary and undisturbed. Differences of context are not in themselves sufficient explanations for the different kinds of consumer behaviour, however. In his history of live musical performances in pre- and post-Revolutionary France, James H. Johnson (1995) describes a major transformation in the behaviour of audiences. Prior to the Revolution, a concert was the pretext for conversation, intrigue and sexual play between members of the audience. The performance, much of the time, was simply ignored; audience members arrived late and left when they were so inclined. Fifty years later, audience members were likely to sit silent, transfixed by concerts or operatic performances, respectful of artists and swept up in highly individual, emotional responses. This new politeness, Johnson suggests, was a symptom of the new character of big-city life. With the crumbling of a tightly knit aristocracy, the newly ascendant middle class moved in a world of strangers, seeking out forms of entertainment which nourished their sense of individualistic self-improvement. Insecure about their own capacity to judge, they strained to understand what a composer or singer sought to communicate. Uncertain as to their own status, they clung to the most basic laws of etiquette and restraint.

Similar transformations have marked the history of forms such as jazz, whose passage from night club to concert hall to outdoor festival has followed shifts in that music's status. These movements of venue are marked, as well, by changes in the degree to which the experience of jazz is a celebration of in-group solidarity or personal enlightenment for the individual isolated within a crowd. Audiences at live music performances are regularly caught between two views of music and the proper ways to consume it. One sees music as the most communally festive of cultural forms, the backdrop to social games and rituals. The other casts music as the most pure and abstract of the arts, transcending the social forms of language and narrative to connect with a listener's emotional core. Rock bands or club deejays, whose playing drowns out the conversation which they know, nevertheless, will go on, have negotiated this predicament

better than many. In the tension between these ways of conceiving musical consumption, the links between modes and contexts of listening are regularly redrawn. Alongside the familiar contexts of the stadium concert or the club gig, the last few years have brought such new twists as deejay turntable performances in restaurants, for customers who sit passively at their tables. In the United States-based 'home concert movement', artists perform live for several dozen fans, in the living rooms of hosts' homes; during evenings which often include communal meals and discussion (but may exclude tobacco and alcohol).

A quarter of a century ago, tours by rock and pop performers were invariably organised to promote the release of new records. The year since have witnessed an unravelling of this system. Older rock acts, such as David Bowie or Bruce Springsteen, have finally acknowledged that those who purchase expensive concert tickets want to hear older, familiar hits, rather than new material which, for longtime fans, often represents idiosyncratic or unappealing shifts of direction. This transformation of concert tours into blockbuster events is one element among many in the ongoing integration of popular music within the larger tourism and leisure industries. Live performances of jazz, 'world' music, Cajun, reggae and a myriad of other styles are now most easily found in the annual festivals which punctuate the holiday calendars of North American and European cities. In recent years, the same has become true of ska or punk styles marked increasingly by lengthy festivals offering several bands over many hours or days. Older country music stars, long accustomed to lengthy tours of fairgrounds and concert venues, have established permanent residencies in concert halls which bear their names, attracting fans who travel to hear them perform as part of their vacations. While live performances long served as the contexts for experimentation and the trying-out of new material, they are increasingly among the most conservative of musical events, occasions to revisit music which is familiar and tested.

Music, space and time

The consumption of music has helped to reshape our sense of place. Significant ways, it has helped to draw the cultural maps with which Western consumers understand the world. While the publishing and movie industries enshrined London, Paris, Hollywood and New York as centres of cultural power, music did much to nourish a sense of cultural regionalism. Memphis, Liverpool, Seattle, Manchester, and New Orleans all figure prominently within a widely shared cultural geography because

they resonate as the places from which important musical styles have emerged. (Indeed, it is much harder to think of major musical movements which originated in New York City or Los Angeles.) Radio and the phonograph helped to create national – even global – audiences for regional styles like country music or acid house, drawing them out of the places in which they were born and into a shared popular culture. Technically, these media allowed musicians to remain at home, while their music travelled, but they also encouraged musicians to travel, to perform live for the new, distant audiences created by these new media. In his history of country music, Richard Peterson (1997) notes that the growth of touring circuits for musicians in the 1930s followed the ever-expanding reach of the radio signals, which carried live barn-dance programs featuring these musicians. At the present time, mix CDs by prominent club deejays have served to make them internationally known, creating the conditions which result in invitations to top the bills of dance events around the world.

Just as importantly, the consumption of music has shaped our sense of time. The phonograph made older performance styles and musical genres available in the present, for imitation or enjoyment. Indeed, and to borrow a term from media historians, the recording serves as a form of 'extrasomatic memory' (memory stored outside the body), preserving music in material artefacts which outlast the moments in which that music was performed. Music history accumulates for us, in the range of reissues available at our local record shop, rather than merely passing us by and disappearing in the endless turnover of styles and fashions. More broadly, each new development in music delivery systems has extended the availability of the past, if only because expanded storage capacity has allowed the past to be packaged in more abundant and detailed ways. Obvious cases here include the 33-rpm album (which spurred the gathering together of old 78 singles in album form), the cassette (which allowed for personalised compilations longer than the typical vinyl album), and the compact disc (whose extended recording time has dampened, if only slightly, public opposition to its higher price). While each such innovation has been embraced by producers of new music, its popular acceptance (particularly with older consumers) has much to do with its capacity to keep alive the past. In a sense, the rush of reissues of past materials serves to temper the shock of novelty which each new technology risks producing. This is a familiar pattern from the history of communications media, as Marshall McLuhan (1995) and others have noted. Just as the printing press, in the fifteenth century, sparked the massive publication of texts from classical antiquity, the Internet has led to the wide-spread circulation of old album covers, public domain recordings from decades earlier, and fan sites devoted to the most obscure and faded of musical moments. The musical past now seems more

minutely differentiated, richly documented and abundantly accessible than at any other historical moment.

If the past of popular music seems increasingly weighty, its present almost invariably seems fragile. As radio and television pull music from different corners of our culture into our own listening environments, they also organise the music available into a constantly evolving stream of songs. Through a variety of mechanisms (popularity charts and release schedules, for example) we have become used to the idea that music changes every week. As Simon Frith (1981) once noted, there are no logical reasons why millions of teenagers, strangers to each other, should listen to the same records at the same time. Records are not, like television or radio programs, subject to fixed schedules, nor, like the newspaper, do they become obsolete in any obvious sense within short periods of time. Nevertheless, like the newspaper, the turnover of records has come to endow the passage of time with a particular rhythm. To consume music is, much of the time, to be caught up within a distinctive velocity of change, a particular (almost metronomic) way of marking time. Top 40, the format conceived by radio programmers in the 1950s, remains perhaps the purest example of this metronomic impulse. Top 40 was never more than a loose grouping of songs from different traditions, but these were organised to compete directly within a single game of popularity. The simple fact of this competition, rather than any shared properties of the music itself, gave Top 40 its unity. Attempts by the music industries to introduce national sales charts in countries which have hitherto lacked them reveal how culturally specific these ideas about popularity may be. In many such contexts, the idea of different kinds of music being measured against each other, on a scale which changes every week, will seem quite ludicrous.

Philip Ennis (1992) once suggested that the modern music industries were born at that point, after the Second World War, when the various ways of measuring a song's popularity began to be aligned with each other – when radio airplay, the sale of records and sheet music, and jukebox play all became calibrated, in a sense, as part of a single process. These different kinds of success no longer corresponded to different musical worlds with their own audiences and operations – each was now part of a record's overall lifecycle, a step in its passage through the public realm. If popularity on jukeboxes typically followed radio airplay by a predictable amount of time, the industry could plan distribution to jukeboxes accordingly. If fans of slow ballads typically took longer in deciding to buy an album than fans of fast-paced dance music, the release of a slow single to adult radio formats might prolong that album's sales momentum, as these slower fans 'took over' from dance fans in purchasing the album. The slow but phenomenal sales success of Moby's album *Play*, in 1999–2000, came from the

alignment of numerous different audiences and markets (dance, music television, clothing store sound systems) into a sequence which saw new fans being introduced to the record just as others had moved on.

Differences in taste between different age-groups are often less striking than the rates at which their favourite styles or genres will change and develop. Fans of underground dance music will learn that records rise and fall in three-week cycles of popularity, and are not surprised when entire styles become obsolete within a year of their emergence. Heavy Metal fans, on the other hand, typically learn the complex genealogy of metal – with its founders and respected heroes – as part of their apprenticeship in one or more Heavy Metal fandoms. The casual, middle-aged music fan, hearing a Céline Dion album in July, may request it as a gift the following Christmas, with no anxieties over its possibly being out of date.

Music, consumption and technology

Our consumption of music is almost always technologically mediated, shaped by the devices which bring music into our lives. One of rock culture's most cherished (and self-important) founding myths was that of the post-war American teenager lying in bed, late at night, listening to black music of the American south from a small, bedside radio. The solitude and secrecy of this act of listening would have been almost unimaginable twenty years earlier, when radios were weighty pieces of furniture in the family parlour and it was assumed that music would appeal across generational lines. In the period following the Second World War, as the number of radios (and record players) in the home multiplied – and as radios themselves became smaller – these devices moved into the private spaces of the bedroom or work space. Individuals could now listen more easily to music which might no longer be acceptable or pleasurable to others. Similarly, while the rise of music television networks in the 1980s was made possible by cable and satellite technologies, it was spurred by the growing tendency for middle-class homes to contain more than one television set. One of these sets, located in the teenager's bedroom or basement recreation room, could be tuned to programming which was unlikely to be enjoyed by the family as a whole.

In a broader sense, we might consider the ways in which technologies for consuming music help to unite people in groups or isolate them as individuals. As David W. Stowe (1994) argues, radio and records have often functioned differently to organise individuals into audiences. Radio served to create mass audiences for musical forms (like swing music in the 1930s), while records allowed people to develop more individual tastes in

private. And yet, as Stowe notes, the jazz recording became the focal point for jazz communities, who came together to discuss and trade records, or to analyse the solos those records contained. Martha Bayles (1994) suggests that the famous 'mixing' of black and white styles in the American south – another of rock'n'roll's founding myths – was only possible because radio and records gave whites access to black music while not requiring physical, face-to-face contact between the races. The personal stereo, introduced in the early 1980s, let people take their music into streets and public transportation systems, but it meant that much listening was now secret and solitary. Passengers sitting alongside each other, in aeroplanes or on trains, might now pursue their most idiosyncratic musical interests without fear of offending each other or revealing too much of themselves. In contrast, the boom-box, whose popularity rose during the same period, made music a means for asserting one's presence in public space. More generally, music (in the form of cassettes, compact discs and instruments) serves as a token of connection to other places, carried in the baggage of people as they move or sold and played in the restaurants and retail shops which serve immigrant communities.

Music and the youth market

Since the late 1970s, the music industries have grappled with the fact that people seem to buy music less frequently as they get older. A survey of United States music-buying habits in 1999 was much heralded for revealing a boom in the sales of records to those over forty-five years of age; their share of the total music market rose, in one year, from 18 per cent to 24 per cent. Nevertheless, this same study showed that those in the narrower 15 to 24 age-range spent an equivalent amount of money on recorded music (RIAA 2000). The markets for popular music in Western countries have been skewed towards youth for some thirty years now, with only minor fluctuations. Countless explanations, many of them circular in nature, have been used to explain why this is so. Youth, it is regularly assumed, buys more recorded music because the industry keeps producing the kind of music which young people are likely to buy.

In countries with strong private radio industries, such as the United States and Canada, music's associations with youth have produced major tensions between broadcasters and record companies. Record companies have always wanted radio stations to play new releases, to expose them to potential buyers, and have long embraced the excitement which Top 40 formats, chart countdowns and listener request lines brought to the presentation of music. Radio stations, in contrast, have turned increasingly

away from contemporary pop and rock, in an effort to reach those listeners most desired by advertisers. By the 1970s, for example, most radio programmers throughout North America had eliminated listener request lines, on the grounds that those likely to call were probably not representative of their desired audiences. Figuring out the musical tastes of desirable listeners – employed, financially stable adults in their thirties or forties – has been a major challenge for the radio industry.

In an earlier age, one might simply have assumed that these older listeners, having grown up before the emergence of rock music, would stay bound to the music of that earlier period. By the 1980s, demographic shifts had made the question more complex. Having been shaped by rock music, what became of people's tastes as they grew older? Were there other styles or genres to which listeners 'graduated' with age? If listeners remained loyal to rock music, would they continue to follow each new development within it? Or would they, rather, seek out programming which offered the familiar and the nostalgic? As people age, do their criteria as to what is important or pleasurable in music shift as well? Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these questions fuelled innumerable attempts to develop psychological profiles of the ageing music fan. In the mid-1980s, for example, a leading United States radio format consultant tried to characterise the typical 25 to 40 year-old listener of the then-popular Album-Oriented Rock format. These were conservatives who liked 'to party', he claimed, 'weekend hippies' who had been raised on the television show *Saturday Night Live* and retained a rebellious streak. To reach them, radio broadcasters should program the music of Bruce Springsteen or John Cougar, artists who communicated 'real feelings on an intense level'. The ageing of the rock audience appeared to challenge one of the longstanding prejudices about middle-aged radio listeners – that such listeners would inevitably come to prefer instrumental, background music as they grew older. In the late 1960s, middle-aged adults had been targeted with music bearing such labels as 'Beautiful Music' or 'Middle-of-the-Road' – instrumental versions of popular songs in which vocals were absent or reduced to background choruses. By the early 1980s, conventional wisdom within the music industries claimed that listeners in their thirties and forties were drawn, in fact, to music in which vocals were prominent. Vocals offered a connection to real people and real emotions, features seen to assume greater importance for listeners as they confronted the vulnerabilities of middle age. Similar beliefs have led music industry personnel to see country music as the probable choice of those who grow out of rock. 'The adult music of the seventies is country music', a radio executive told *Billboard* in 1977, in a claim which has been repeated ever since.

The effort to hang on to adult consumers has also meant redesigning

the places in which musical recordings are sold. By the late 1970s, record retailers realised that their shops had become unwelcoming places for several categories of consumer. They were alienating to older people (who found nothing familiar in the records displayed or played on in-store sound systems), intimidating to women (who felt excluded from the value systems of a largely male sales force) and seemingly snobbish towards those who plucked up the courage to ask sales clerks for information. The rise of the mammoth music superstore, since the early 1990s, has partially resolved these problems. Located on the high streets of most cities, superstores cultivate an atmosphere of casual browsing, and minimise exposure to unfriendly styles by segregating different sorts of music (such as jazz or classical music) within sound-insulated boutiques. Like the giant bookstores which now dot the cityscapes of urban centres in the United States, the music superstores encourage potential consumers to linger and explore, in an environment which has been carefully designed to be non-intimidating.

The music industry's preoccupation with keeping and winning older buyers has obscured the rise in importance of another demographic sector, one whose contribution to industry sales has soared. In the late 1990s, the owners of toy store chains (such as the United States-based Toys R Us) noted a shift in the sorts of things which children were requesting as gifts. Toys as such were losing popularity; in their place, boys and girls of pre-teen age were asking for music and clothes. This was both a cause and effect of major changes in the programming strategies of music television networks, which have seen their viewers get ever younger. The unexpected commercial longevity of the Spice Girls, who found new fans among eight and nine-year old girls, offered startling evidence that the lower age-range of music consumers was going down. Amidst anxieties over an increasingly sexualised pre-adolescent consumer marketplace, analysts noted that sales of music for children had grown enormously throughout the 1990s. If ten-year-olds are now actively engaged in following and consuming music, this is not simply because they strive to emulate their teenage siblings. Since earliest childhood, musical films and so-called 'kid audio' CDs have been central to their leisure, with long-term effects on tastes and consuming habits which have yet to reveal themselves fully.

Music in the lives of youth

The broader question of music's importance in the lives of youth, and of youth in the lives of music, has rarely been satisfactorily addressed. Popular music scholars and industry personnel have long speculated about the

declining importance of music in people's lives as they age. In doing so, they are often led to claims about music's place in the psychological states characteristic of youth or adolescence. Richard Dixon (1980), in a study of adolescent musical tastes, saw youth as a 'phase generally characterised by heightened social, emotional, sexual and deviant experimentation.' Later in life, he suggested, 'commitments, obligations, and responsibilities ... arise to divert attention away from musical involvement'. Here, as in other treatments of the issue, 'involvement' serves to designate a number of things. It may mean a psychological or affective connection to music itself. In this kind of involvement, music's appeal comes from its capacity to express (or even resemble) the emotional energies of youth, during a point in the life cycle at which these are particularly intense or confusing. Versions of this claim are often invoked to explain the rise of rock'n'roll. For some, the dull homogeneity of popular music in the decade following the Second World War created pent-up demand by teenagers for more intense and polemical sorts of music. Rock'n'roll records emerged from the independent sector of the music industry to fulfil this demand.

The claim that youth is more intensely involved with music in emotional terms is both misleading and the symptom of a real problem. It is misleading in that it reduces involvement with music to the purchasing of music in recorded form. In fact, the amount of time spent listening to music is a poor indicator of the frequency with which people purchase musical recordings. The elderly and retired, with an abundance of leisure time and an attachment to radio, rarely buy music in recorded form, but it is often a constant backdrop to their lives. (The same is true of office-workers, those in the hospitality industries, and people who drive vehicles for a living.) Major segments of the broadcasting industry cater to audiences whose attentive devotion to musical programming does not result in their purchasing music in recorded form.

Nevertheless, the consumption of music by older listeners has become a problem in the recent history of popular music. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the musical preferences of the elderly, who rarely bought records, became more and more obviously disengaged from new developments in the world of music. They had little familiarity with the ongoing parade of new record releases, and a diminished sense of historical developments. Increasingly, the image of people withdrawing from music as they aged went hand-in-hand with that of a record industry deserting the musical styles to which these people listened. In this context, the musical tastes of older listeners could only be imagined as inconsequential, leftover residues of their own youth and of a collectively shared historical period. Such tastes were no longer seen as distinct, coherent tastes and

prejudices which might be just as intensely felt as those of youth. At regular intervals, music critics and industry personnel claimed that this process was not inevitable – that an industry geared to producing the music which older consumers liked would find an eager and involved new market.

There were many reasons to doubt this claim. If people maintain an emotional connection to music throughout their lives, other sorts of involvement may nevertheless wither. These include an immersion in the information which surrounds music, or a preference for those activities in which music plays a central role. In Western societies, at least, these sorts of involvement in music do seem to unravel as people grow older. The strong association of music and youth within our culture might be shaped by the ways in which music circulates. The portability of recordings, playback devices and radios is such that listening to music may be easily combined with other activities – driving around in cars, for example, or sitting in cafés and bars. Music is central to forms of social interaction which are more common in the lives of youth than in those of middle-aged adults (for whom the contexts of such interaction are usually more formal). To buy records frequently is to be integrated within a very distinct kind of consumer behaviour. It involves choosing from a wide array of available options, guided by a range of influences and sources of information. These forms of guidance – conversation about music, media coverage of new releases, and so on – all weigh more heavily in the lives of youth than in those of adults.

Here, again, the argument may seem circular: music is important in the lives of youth because youth invests it with importance. What seems indisputable is that music offers a domain in which, during their adolescence, people begin to explore (and develop) their tastes and skills as consumers. Musical commodities are among the first that young people buy for themselves; they are relatively inexpensive, easily carried around, and lend themselves to repeated enjoyment. Music becomes one of the key realms in which an individual's criteria of aesthetic judgement take shape and are explored within consumer transactions. In such transactions, it might be argued, people develop many of their earliest understandings of the social and personal meanings of consumer choice. Early on, consumers weigh the commerciality of certain artists against the authenticity of others, the genuine against the poser, the has-been against the still relevant. These choices take place against the backdrop of a constantly changing stream of new styles and titles. Only youth exists within the intense peer cultures which invest this change with significance, or make the taking up an attitude towards that change a fundamental social challenge.

The imperative of choice has made music (along with clothing) a key token in that long process by which individuals learn what it might mean to be young or old, black or white, male or female. In this respect, music offers one of the key tokens with which young people mark their differences from others, in a complicated game of status and identity. We are not surprised when secondary school students form social groups on the basis of shared musical tastes. We would hardly expect the same of middle-aged workers in an insurance company or government department.

Music and generation

The very idea of generations as having distinctive cultures is a rather recent one, the product of two long-term developments. One of these is an ever-increasing sense of generational identification, the belief that one's cultural experiences are shared most intensely with others of one's age. Historians of the family have noted that this is a product of modern life. Two centuries ago, classrooms and households might include people of several different generations, living and learning alongside each other. With time – with the decline of agricultural life and the mass migration of people to cities – schools organised themselves into classrooms filled with people of similar ages. By the twentieth century, it was normal that people passed through youth in lockstep with others of similar age, subject to the same sorts of experience and influence at each rung of the age ladder.

The feeling of intra-generational solidarity would be strengthened, in the twentieth century, by new, mostly electronic media like radio and the cinema. With their turnover of titles and styles, these have helped to mark time as an ongoing succession of novelties and sensations. As we grow up, we emerge into a world of cultural experiences unfolding in sequence. We do so, of course, at the same time as thousands of others of similar age, and our collective movement through the lifecycle is interwoven with the turnover of songs, movies, books and historical events. If songs evoke, for most of us, particular moments in our own lives, those moments are usually those in which these songs were released and found popularity. The memories evoked are, as a result, collectively shared, and shared most profoundly with those of similar age. As we move out of the school system and into the workplace, the range of age-groups with which we are likely to associate will expand. The sense of generational solidarity with those around us – of a common set of cultural reference points and shared experiences – will begin to wither. If youth culture seems more coherent and intense than that of other stages in the life cycle, this has much to do with

the intertwining of generational histories and the larger parade of public sensations produced by the cultural industries.

Music and subcultures

The term subculture has settled so comfortably within the analysis of popular music that we may forget its origins elsewhere. For the sociologist Robert Park (1996), writing in the early twentieth century, the concept of 'subculture' invited scholars in Western countries to bring the methods of the anthropologist to bear on their own surroundings – on Greenwich Village, for example, or Chicago's North Side. After the Second World War, the sociologists began working steadily with the concept, focusing on the urban underworlds of gamblers, jazz musicians or drug addicts. By the 1960s, subcultural analysis had become an important political tool for radical scholars in the social sciences. They argued forcefully that groups previously seen as deviant and dysfunctional – small-time thieves, for example – should be examined in terms of the values and worldviews which gave meaning to their lives (and not simply with an eye to the prevailing laws and norms which they had violated).

Amidst the proliferating youth cultures of the 1960s and 1970s, 'subculture' captured the ways in which music, and its role in people's lives, had been transformed. 'Subculture' was a useful shorthand for the worlds of style in which young people lived, the coherent clusters of dress, drugs, meeting-places and linguistic idioms which had come together around distinct kinds of music. In their fixation on the most visible of these worlds, journalists and academics typically found subcultures only where gangs of (mostly male) youths congregated in public space. (Earlier sociologists had concentrated on the hidden worlds of small-time gamblers or petty criminals as much as on the more conspicuous teen-age street gangs.) Terms like 'tribe' and 'ritual', common in newspaper articles on the mods or punks, kept alive the sense of subculture analysis as a big-city anthropology, but the issues in play were shifting. Scholars of the 1950s and early 1960s had focused on the ways in which subcultural activity – the funding and maintenance of a drug habit, for example – were like everyday work, subject to routines and insider jargon. In contrast, many of those who came to study musical subcultures were drawn by an interest in the creative, possibly transgressive dimensions of leisure.

Increasingly, the term 'subculture' has been used to describe a particular way of consuming cultural goods. Sociologists' earlier emphasis on illegality has given way to debate over the ways in which a range of activities,

most of them legal, challenge or support the existing economic order. In this shift, subcultural analysis became focused on the accoutrements of style or the circulation of cultural artefacts. Well-known subcultures of the 1970s, such as punk, were famous for their public displays of violence, but they were also redefining consumption within new networks of small-scale capitalism and artisanal labour. In so doing, they helped to create micro-economies of a sort, social and entrepreneurial worlds in which the divisions between producers and consumers, or artists and audiences were weakened. Subcultural analysis would come to focus on the artefacts produced within these worlds, on the tokens of stylistic warfare and semiotic reshuffling which resulted. The spectacular quality of a subculture's public gestures has often seemed curiously disproportionate to the obscure, ephemeral commodities which circulate within subcultural worlds.

Like artworlds generally, subcultures often combine the vanguardist commitment to social revolution with the aristocratic dream of a life devoted to artistic experience. Subcultures of the 1970s and 1980s very often joined the snobbish attack on mass taste to the ethical claim that music was degraded outside of a life fully devoted to music. In this sense, even such seemingly innocent subcultures as those surrounding Northern Soul or lounge music might seem oppositional, when the innumerable minor objects and practices on which they were fixated formed worlds in which members might live much of their daily lives.

Arguments about musical subcultures are, much of the time, arguments about work and leisure. One strand in the study of subcultures seeks to recast the activities of punks or hip-hoppers as a kind of work – as the creative transformation of materials from the dominant world. This defines subcultures as spaces of experimentation and innovation, but it also involves an insistence (of almost caricatural influence within cultural studies) on the creative labour inherent in any act of consumption. Recognition of this 'labour' challenges the claim that consumers are passive dupes, but it also acknowledges the important contributions which consumer creativity makes to the leisure and style industries. Subcultures mix and match elements from the larger culture in ways that result in new clusters of meaning – signposts to new possibilities which both challenge the market and inject it with new ideas.

The claim that members of subcultures work creatively to produce new meanings out of the detritus of the dominant world might well betray an unacknowledged work ethic. Few musical subcultures today are willing simply to embrace the hedonistic, decadent ethos of earlier bohemian traditions. Even the New Romantics of the early 1980s felt compelled to the- orise their commitment to extravagant dress and glamorous nightlife as a

challenge to the Thatcher government's warnings about unrealistic expectations. While the recent house music culture of Ibiza and other clubland vacation spots may come closest to an unembarrassed hedonism, its history is regularly retold from the earnest perspective of revolutions won and betrayed, of ongoing battles waged against commercialisation or stagnation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, subcultures intruded dramatically upon public attention, then seemed to recede. By the year 2000, it seemed clear that subcultures almost never disappeared anymore. Rather, they survived and developed alongside each other, perpetuating a collective devotion to different musical styles and historical moments. Doom Metal, death metal, ska, classic punk, LA hard core, garage psychedelia, 1970s funk, indie pop, rockabilly, swing, 1980s electrobeat, German electronica and dozens of other styles now persist within networks of fans and institutions which ensure their continued existence. If the effect of early musical subcultures was to announce a revolution, the passing of a torch, subcultures now work to ensure the longevity of styles, keeping alive the communities in which those who discover these styles may find a home. This suggests the ambiguous value assigned to change within popular music. If, at certain moments, change is the necessary clearing away of the past through stylistic renewal, at others it stands as the cynical operation of an industry devoted to novelty. Punk took shape against the backdrop of an industry heavily invested in the careers of well-established elites; it offered its own turbulence as an antidote. Today's subcultures assert the proven value of long-established styles in the face of an industry widely seen as embracing manufactured, short-term fashions.

Critics of musical subcultures sometimes argue that their members are simply better, more skilled and devoted consumers of capitalist commodities than the mainstream music fans they so consistently denigrate. A common critique of American alternative rock fans, by the mid-1990s, was that they had embraced obscurity for its own sake, reducing all of punk's politics to the notion that one should buy rare, exquisite seven-inch vinyl singles rather than mass-produced compact discs. At one level, this seems unnecessarily harsh and cynical. (Indeed, it might be argued, the only realistic political programme for the music fan is an ethics of consumption which favours the small-scale entrepreneur.) Nevertheless, this critique captures the ways in which music subcultures, in their drive to find obscure, overlooked or marginal pieces of music, keep alive the sense that the music industries are complex and endlessly inventive. Subcultures of fans and collectors undertook the historical sifting and archival ordering which led to major labels releasing their back catalogues of 1960s garage

psychedelia or 1950s instrumental exotica. In so doing, they recast what was, arguably, a history of uninformed exploitation as one of voracious open-mindedness. In a more general sense, the collecting of popular cultural artefacts is almost always a means of rehabilitating a market economy. In the complex gradations of popularity and obscurity which settle around records with time, one finds a satisfying rebuke to images of a calculating, rational capitalism. (Even Céline Dion fans, after all, can spend their money and energies tracking down rare promotional CD singles or foreign pressings.)

The meaning of musical consumption is more elusive when we are dealing with places outside those Anglo-American centres in which historically important trends in pop and rock have been born. In Quebec or Mexico, for example, early rock'n'roll subcultures seemed little more than blatant imitations of their United States or British counterparts, more evidence of subservience to the centres of cultural power. In the early 1960s, in both places, hundreds of musicians started groups and began performing cover versions of Anglo-American hits in their own languages. A decade later, musicians and fans came to see this earlier explosion of musical activity as an embarrassment. At best, it was remembered as a frivolous moment on the road to an indigenous, serious rock tradition; at worst, as one more sign of each country's colonisation and underdevelopment. The recuperation of this music would come only twenty or thirty years later, when, with hindsight, it could be remembered as one moment in a political and social awakening from the sombre moral climate of the 1950s. In both Quebec and Mexico, a style which had seemed to epitomise a nation's underdevelopment was also the vehicle through which fans expressed their opposition to the moralising of the Catholic Church or the official culture propagated by the State and its institutions.

The weakness of subcultural analysis in dealing with these contexts stems from its fixation on the ethical dimensions of consumption. In countries outside the Anglo-American world, consumption is never simply a gesture directed at capitalism; it is bound up with complex, international circuits through which information, influence and commodities themselves circulate. To consume underground musical styles in Canada or Australia, for example, usually meant seeking out information on the latest records and shifts of taste in New York or Manchester, reading imported music magazines and buying foreign pressings from specialty record stores. Each subcultural gesture—dressing up in a particular way or choosing this act over another—signalled, more than anything else, a cosmopolitanism, an attentiveness to what was happening somewhere else. As a result, subcultural styles from elsewhere almost always enter these countries through the mediating influence of cosmopolitan, well-informed

middle class consumers. Subcultural activity, in such circumstances, bears an uneasy and uncertain relationship to the 'truth' of experience which it is presumed to express.

Global passages

At the end of the twentieth century, the music industry saw signs that the appeal of music from the United States was declining around the world. Industry analysts noted that Asian and European markets were proving resistant to stars and recordings from the United States. Styles which persistently dominated United States sales charts, such as country music and rap, were much less popular outside that country. The problem, European record company executives complained, was that United States music markets were too subcultural, too insistent that performers perpetuate the purest and most hard-core versions of these musical forms. While other markets embraced performers who crossed over, appealing to a variety of audiences, the United States market seemed to reflected the nation's more profound divisions of race, class and region. The days when U2 or REM could stand as genuinely global rock stars, popular both with casual buyers and connoisseurs, were apparently waning. Sales charts in Britain, Japan and Germany showed lower levels of penetration by United States-based performers than throughout most of the previous quarter century. Artists from outside the Anglo-American world, such as the Italian act Nek, sold millions of records in several countries, while failing to break through in North America.

Shortly thereafter, the global success of United States performers like Britney Spears, Eminem and Bon Jovi suggested a renewal of American music's place within the world. These performers stood as evidence that the United States industry had reoriented itself to the marketing of adolescent pop and hip-hop. Amidst predictions that the next generation of teenagers would be the largest in the nation's history, the five remaining major record companies faced accusations that they were dropping long-term strategies for artist development in order to concentrate on the marketing of globally viable pop stars.

Nevertheless, the means by which consumers are exposed to music have changed, in ways which enhance the autonomy of regional or national markets. In Asia, Quebec, Mexico and several European countries, national musical cultures have been strengthened by new media services, such as music video networks. These have bolstered local recording industries and bound populations together within significant new media markets. In this context, the outlets for local performers and national

languages have increased. In a challenge to longstanding notions of the authentic, the most nationally distinctive musical styles and performers are often the most blatantly commercial, if only because they are shaped by local traditions of entertainment and celebrity. The cosmopolitan connoisseurs of British dance music or goth metal, trumpeting the freedom of choice they identify with underground styles, are often those who most slavishly follow the fashions of a few global centres.

Writing in *The New York Observer* in 1999, music critic D. Strauss strained to describe the new sorts of taste patterns observable in hip circles in the West. He spoke of people turning away, in large numbers, from the tradition and canon of Anglo-American rock, seeking inspiration in what he called 'the necessarily misunderstood imagined pasts of others: French pop, German hippies, Brazilian tropicalia, Japanese imitations of all of the above'. Interest in all of these things had, indeed, rippled through Anglo-American musical culture in recent years, shaping the mannerist exercises of so-called post-rock forms, the more large-scale strategic moves of performers like Beck, and the endlessly interesting new syntheses found in French or Japanese club music.

Globalism in the music industries is shaped by evolving industrial structures, but it finds expression, as well, in the sense given by consumers to the endless proliferation of new or rediscovered artefacts. As the range of niche tastes and technologies for delivering music expands, one sees a tendency to perpetuate a centre, to revalorise endlessly an Anglo-American canon. The boxed sets, bootlegged live albums, and innumerable variations of classic albums issued by major labels deepen and solidify the presence of that canon, perpetuating a sense of that canon as monumental. On the other hand, global musical relations have been shaped by centrifugal tendencies which send interest outward, leading to the unexpected global circulation of national styles and artefacts. This centrifugal movement is nourished by the scavenger-like record collecting of dance club disc jockeys, lounge music revivalists, or curator-compilers like David Byrne, and by the activities of marginal reissue labels. These tendencies are dragging back, into the realms of hip credibility, musical currents long dismissed as false imitations or examples of debased exploitation. Italian jazz-funk, Asian girl-group garage psychedelia, or funky crime movie soundtracks from India have all moved, in recent years, into the radar range of Western deejay-remixers or lounge revivalists. Rediscovery of these hybrid forms is nourished partly by the thrill with which they seem scandalously counter-canonical, but to embrace them involves a relationship to other musics which inverts the patterns of respect typical, for example, of 'world music'. (Recent revivals of interest in unabashedly imitative Québécois pop music of the 1960s, for example, are driven by the

sense that these adaptations, on the margins of a global industry, offer more interesting cross-fertilisations of influence than the original, canonical versions.)

We consume music as we do films or television programmes, for meaning and satisfaction, but the distinctiveness of music comes from the lines of connection linking our acts of consumption over time. These lines of connection map our evolving relationships to peer group unity and individual exploration. They show our shifting propensities for choices which confirm our social identities and others which (deliberately or not) transgress these. The pleasures of musical consumption, elusive as they may be, are rich in the affinities which they express and the range of contexts which they mark. In their succession, the pop music artefacts we consume, minor and ephemeral as each may be, trace our place within the divisions and solidarities of the social world.

Further reading

The works of my co-editor, Simon Frith, have proved indispensable in linking the social and aesthetic dimensions of music consumption. In particular, *Sound Effects* (London: Constable, 1981) and *Performing Rites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) offer richly nuanced analyses of the tastes and pleasures of popular music. *The Subcultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), co-edited by Sarah Thornton and Ken Gelder, is a strong, comprehensive collection of articles on the notion of subculture, with great relevance to the analysis of popular music. Histories of musical consumption in the last hundred years are almost always histories of the music industries themselves, and Philip Ennis' *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rock'n'Roll in American Popular Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1992) remains, for me, a highly useful account. The ongoing anxieties of the music industries, in the face of shifting demographics, new technologies and competing new musical directions, are better documented in the business press than in any scholarly literature. *Billboard* and *The Wall Street Journal*, in particular, have both come to be more probing, in recent years, in their discussion of music and cultural consumption in general.