

‘Madchester Rave On’¹: placing the fragments of popular music

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Summary *Geographers have neglected popular music, in spite of its key role in cultural identity. Using the example of Manchester, we outline geography’s role in forging a certain distinctiveness to the city’s ‘independent’ music. It is suggested that such musical fragments, which complement and contrast with the global aspirations of mainstream popular music, feed into the formation of postmodern ‘neo-tribes’.*

... what is impressive about musical practice in all its variety is that it takes place in many different places, for different purposes, for different constituencies and practitioners, and of course at many different times. (Said 1991, xviii–xix)

Introduction

Popular music² remains a key feature of contemporary British culture. This is in spite of increased competition in recent years from alternative distractions, such as video, computer games and the media-trumpeted ‘new rock ’n’ roll’ of alternative comedy, poetry, etc. Thus, in 1993, official sales of recorded music alone grew 13.5 per cent, to £785.7m, to say nothing of second-hand and other unrecorded sales. Although this came after a 2.4 per cent fall in 1992, this had been the first drop in sales since the recessionary year of 1980 (*Financial Times* 1994). However, in spite of an increasing acceptance of the need to study general popular cultural forms (Burgess and Gold 1985; Cosgrove and Jackson 1987), cultural geographers have made few studies of popular music. As Smith (1994) has noted in this journal, they have focused instead on the visual dimension of landscape rather than the aural dimension of ‘soundscape’. Instead, most of the running has been made by sociologists (for example, Frith 1983, 1988) and ‘cultural theorists’ (for example, Chambers 1985), reflecting the more general work on popular culture undertaken by Birmingham’s Centre for Cultural Studies in the 1970s (Hall *et al* 1980). Exceptions to this rule include studies of the environmental and landscape imagery in song lyrics (for example, Jarvis 1985; Moss 1992) and some North American collections (for example, Carney 1979), although these works remain rather isolated within the mainstream. Given this state of affairs, this paper³ begins to place the study of popular music more prominently on the geographical agenda by reference to the way in which place, both in imagination (virtual) and on the ground (material), mediates the production and consumption of popular music. It is argued that even though the capitalist ‘music industry’ may select artists more or less at random for promotion (Street 1993, 52), Adorno’s predictions regarding the increasing blandness and homogeneity of commodified music may be seen as being unnecessarily bleak or one-dimensional (Smith 1994; Said 1991). There is still a role for geography in understanding the emergence and reception of bands and musical genres (*cf* Cohen 1991a; Kruse 1993; Street 1993). Moreover, the continued geographical mediation of

popular music is of considerable contemporary significance in the context of so-called 'neo-tribalism', an idea which has emerged from debates surrounding the rise of the postmodern condition.

Postmodernism and the fragments of popular music

The concept of 'neo-tribalism' is a central concept in the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli's discussion of postmodern society (for example, see Maffesoli 1988; Hetherington 1990). In his writings, Maffesoli seeks to play down the role of economic class in defining and explaining *everyday life*. For him, 'common experience' is the 'true motor of human history' (Maffesoli 1989, 4) and this cannot be reduced to the experience of abstract categories such as 'class'. Indeed, he suggests that convergence between 'common experience' and the abstractions of society, such as economic class, represented just a contingent period of human history—modernity. In the postmodern present:

The heterogeneity of social life, in all its dimensions, is currently making a return in full force to the field of actuality. (Maffesoli 1987, 85).

This heterogeneity is reflected in neo-tribes, defined in terms of a 'multitude of individual acts of *self-identification*' (Bauman 1992, 136), where people gather together to 'bathe in the affectual ambience' (Maffesoli 1991, 11) in their search for community and belonging, the loss of which is the *leit-motif* of the postmodern condition (Giddens 1991; Harvey 1989). These postmodern tribes differ from the 'true' *Gemeinschaft* communities of anthropological tribes in that they are actively achieved rather than being born into (Shields 1992, 14).

The acts of self-identification on which neo-tribes exist involve 'individual decisions to sport the symbolic tags of tribal allegiance' (Bauman 1992, 137); defining *oneself* as a member of that tribe. As implied in the introduction, popular music provides one of the key 'symbolic tags' in contemporary society and thus becomes intimately linked to neo-tribalism and the 'postmodern condition' which it addressess. In short, sections of youth society display their attitudes and politics through actively forming distinct groups. Consequently, for those keenly interested in specific types of popular music, one of the first questions to be asked of a stranger often relates to their musical tastes. Thus, popular music 'transgresses' (Said 1991) from the musical realm to society as a whole. One's choice of music represents a 'cultural expression' (Frith 1988, 107) and one's cultural expression is increasingly significant in defining who one is, as alternative bases of identification have fallen into the background.

Unlike the 'golden era' of rock and pop music in the 1950s and 1960s, when relatively few 'popular' strands to youth culture could be identified clearly (notwithstanding 'mods' and 'rockers' (Cohen 1987)), there are now extremely diverse genres of popular music. With the death of the 'rock era', facilitated by the emergence of punk rock in 1976 (Bloomfield 1991; Frith 1988), we are left with 'a culture of the margins around a collapsed centre' (*i-D* 1987, quoted in Frith 1988, 5). Frith associates these 'scattered "taste markets"' with the postmodern condition, where the critical 'legislative' (Bauman 1992) authority which could label 'rock' and 'pop' as coherent wholes had been undermined (see also footnote 2). As a consequence, in Britain today there are to be found, together with the mods and rockers: 'indie kids'; 24-hour 'ravers'; 'heavy metal' rockers; 'soul' enthusiasts;

'progressive rock' aficionados; 'reggae' lovers; 'ambient' exponents; 'gothic' nihilists; 'gangsta' rebels, and so on. Any 'mass' popular consensus has been broken up into a series of largely self-contained fragments (Kruse 1993). These fragments increasingly delineate their adherents into relatively distinct cultural neo-tribes, signifying the need to go beyond any narrowly anti-hegemonic interpretation of 'sub-cultures', such as the punks (for example, Hebdige 1979). Increasingly, they are not just about 'living in leisure time' but involve one's total life (see Bloomfield 1991, 64).

The type of music known as 'indie' in Britain and 'college/alternative' in the US, is particularly suited to neo-tribalism, linked as it is with small (independent) record labels and shops (such as those in Britain's 'Chain with no Name'), low circulation fanzines, intense dedication (see Smith 1995), often encyclopaedic knowledge of the bands and obscure gigs in students' union bars⁴. As Kruse notes:

alternative ... music offers those who engage in a certain set of social practices—practices of consumption, of production, of interaction—a sense of community ... (Kruse 1993, 37)

Whilst bands from this genre can achieve considerable global success when signed-up by major labels, as reflected most clearly by Nirvana, a 'grunge' band who broke free of their Seattle roots to become an international phenomenon, their music and image is one which is deliberately select and exclusive. Recently, this was reflected in the media in the great outpouring of grief which accompanied the suicide of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, a display of emotion which was incomprehensible to the majority of the US population, most of whom had never even heard of him. It is also reflected in the post-teenage adulation shown to The Smiths' former singer, Morrissey, such as the tumultuous reception he received at his first solo performance at Wolverhampton Civic Hall in December 1988 (Rogan 1992, 293–4; Evans 1994).

Geography and the fragments of popular music

He (Martin Rossiter of Gene) may never set the Americans on fire, but neither did The Jam, The Smiths or the Happy Mondays. It even took Moz [Morrissey] a gold lamé shirt to crack it. (Moody 1994, 13)

There are two contrasting views on the extent to which the geographical context through which popular music is produced is influential in delineating the final product. This contrast is expressed in the following two quotes:

Britain has several languages and a multiplicity of accents, but the *voice* that dominates British pop is a commercial construct, a phoney dictation that says more about our slavish relationship to America than it does about popular expression. (Cosgrove 1987, 16)

Geography, as anyone from The Beatles to The Smiths will tell you, is central to pop music. A certain town or city will stamp its identity all over the music it produces as well as shaping the way its bands look and think. Imagine if the (Happy) Mondays had come from Tunbridge Wells ... (*New Musical Express* 1994, 29)

The first quote suggests that geography is unimportant, whilst the second proposes that it is of fundamental significance. Nevertheless, this contrast does not necessarily make the two perspectives incompatible. Instead, they can be regarded as referring to different perspectives and to different sorts of popular music. Cosgrove's quote represents a musicologist's insight that British popular music remains rooted in the sensibilities of the United States of America: an 'Americanization of popular music' thesis. This draws attention to the inauthenticity or hybridisation of popular music, as in the 'changing same' (Gilroy 1993) that is 'black music', refuting any naïve geographical determinism regarding musical production (Smith 1994, 238). Cosgrove's comments can also be seen as alluding to the homogenisation of popular music, aided and abetted by multinational record companies, and the corresponding monetary benefits of establishing a global market. One only has to appreciate the worldwide appeal of artists such as Madonna, Michael Jackson and Phil Collins, to appreciate the success of this strategy. Thus, Frith (1988, 47) associates the term 'Americanization' with the switch to suburbia, with its homogenous and bland image, as the geographical locus of popular music.

Such a globalisation strategy does little to allow popular music to be appropriated by neo-tribes since it works against the fragmentation and containment required for neo-tribalism's communality. Indeed, such appropriation would not be desirable from a capitalist perspective as it would immediately restrict an artist's potential market. Moreover, movement to a global popular music is inclined to squeeze out geography, reducing it to bland cultural stereotypes (for example, 'California' as a land of sun, sea, sex and surf—Banham's (1971) 'surfurbia'), as the music produced must appeal to people in a wide variety of social, economic, political and cultural contexts, and must thus ultimately become virtually 'placeless'. In contrast to such a universalising Adornoesque tendency, the quote from the *New Musical Express* suggests that geography remains central to determining the character of popular music. It still sees a clear position for place since the universalising tendency of capitalism has failed to suppress the importance of a local musical production and consumption. Here, attention is given not to global artists but primarily to bands such as The Smiths and The Happy Mondays in Manchester, England, or the B-52s and REM in Athens, Georgia, USA. In particular, 'indie' music is seen as being extremely geographical (Kruse 1993, 33).

The geographical mediation of popular music

Manchester is a good example to demonstrate some of the links between geography and 'indie' music⁵ (*cf.* Cohen 1991b on Liverpool; Finnegan 1989 on Milton Keynes). Since the late 1970s this city has been firmly associated with a number of distinct types of 'indie' music (Du Noyer 1989, 57). First, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was the distinctive post-punk sound of Joy Division, which mutated into the slightly more cheerful tones of New Order. Bedsit blues returned in the mid 1980s with The Smiths and James, whilst the tempo and mood was revived around 1988, in the wake of 'Acid House', with the arrival of the club-and-Ecstasy sounds of 'Madchester' led by The Happy Mondays, The Stone Roses and Oldham's Inspiral Carpets (Townsend 1994). Crucial to all three periods and styles is that their associated bands were strongly linked to the city of Manchester itself, and, indeed, very much fed off this association. Geography was involved both in the moulding of the city's music and in the music's expansion across time and space. Regarding the moulding of the different genres of recent 'indie'

music in Manchester, first, the songs often contained clear geographical references, extending beyond the more general imaginary landscapes described by Jarvis (1985) and others. Much of the material concerned not the abstractions of love and desire, which form the basis of global popular music, but localised feelings and experiences. The clearest example of this is the work of The Smiths, who titled songs ('*Rusholme Ruffians*' (from '*Meat is Murder*', Rough Trade Records 1985)) and even whole albums ('*Strangeways Here We Come*' (Rough Trade Records 1987)) after their native city. Likewise, album and single covers and other promotional imagery were often distinctively place-related, especially in the early years when the bands were attempting to become established acts. Again in reference to The Smiths, the image of Salford Lads' Club, Shelagh Delaney's '*A Taste of Honey*' and the experience of growing up in areas of the city such as Stretford and Whalley Range were central to the construction of their identity (Rogan 1992; Evans 1994).

Secondly, the existence of local record labels, venues and other promotional facilities has helped Manchester bands develop within their home area, which meant that they did not have to jump immediately onto the train for London. For example, the existence of Factory records and the promotional skills of the head of the company, Anthony Wilson, was a major force behind the emergence of Joy Division. Likewise, the same organisation owned the Hacienda nightclub, a key spur to the Madchester scene. The Happy Mondays themselves were also signed to Factory. In addition, the Manchester music scene has been boosted by the presence of a large number of venues in the city, many of which are quite small (for example, the Academy and the Ritz) and thus facilitate the development of new bands (see also Street 1993). Finally, Manchester's musical productivity has been assisted by an active local press (for example, the *Manchester Evening News*), independent record stores (for example, Eastern Bloc) and local radio stations (for example, Piccadilly Radio), all of which promote further the city's sound to the surrounding population, cultivating the local following which can act as a springboard for more widespread success.

Building on the localised specificity of musical production, attention has also been given to the regional geography of British popular music more generally (Du Noyer 1989). For example, the 'psychedelic scene' around Glastonbury reflects the town's hippie legacy, whilst the reggae scenes in cities in the West Midlands reflect the presence of large numbers of people of West Indian background, with the reggae-tinged '*Coventry Sound*' (Frith 1988, 77–80) moulded further in a more abrasive direction by the city's particularly harsh experiences of the economic recession of the early 1980s. Likewise, the importance of 'Celtic Rock' in Scotland and Wales is readily understood as, in part, a response to nationalism and the marginalisation of these nations' cultural and economic heritage within Great Britain.

Thus far, we have argued that geography, through imagery, infrastructure and localised experiences, has been used by bands as a resource to develop their art. However, geography also helps to sustain specific musical genres and to market and promote them beyond the specific places concerned. First, returning to imagery, as is widely appreciated through studies analysing lyrical content, popular music typically creates romanticised images of a place. For example, The Beatles' '*Strawberry Fields Forever*' and '*Penny Lane*' conjure up a picture which is far more idyllic than the reality of Liverpool life for many. Elsewhere, the Manchester tradition of glum 'indie kids' plus tripped-out Ravers suggests a city of industrial depression yet vibrant nightlife. These varied levels of imagery are maintained both by the songs of the bands but also by their marketing and coverage in the music

press. Hence, the significance of Manchester receiving the ‘Madchester’ tag from that press in the late 1980s. Through manoeuvres such as this the image becomes relatively self-sustaining. Indeed, it has been suggested that many students have been attracted to Manchester because of its musical reputation (Townsend 1994, 52). A second way in which a genre becomes extended through time and space is through appropriating bands from elsewhere, sucking them in and labelling them part of a particular genre. This sometimes reflects a genuine similarity of musical styles but it can also reflect marketing convenience and a journalistic urge to pigeonhole. Hence, we saw the Charlatans (from Northwich) and even Flowered Up (from London) being added to Madchester. Similarly, bands based in the same city as a particular genre but playing a different style of music may also be added rather lazily, as happened with the New Fast Automatic Daffodils and Madchester. Asserting the importance of place in the creation of musical style must not, therefore, reduce the concept of place (and community) to a physically delineated area (Morley 1991, 15): as Ian Brown of The Stone Roses recognised (using a well-worn phrase): ‘It’s not where you’re from, it’s where you’re at’ (quoted in Townsend 1994, 53). Hence, students in the United States could pick-up The Smiths on college radio and make Manchester their own. Neo-tribal association can thus be internationalised or ‘disembedded’ (Giddens 1991), aided and abetted by the cultural technologies (Berland 1992).

The fragility of neo-tribal existence

We were in New Zealand. We were taken to one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen in my life, the place where they filmed *The Piano*. And there I was thinking, ‘This is wonderful’. Then suddenly, it occurred to me that the only reason we were there was because of MTV. And whenever you see MTV, there is a Coca-Cola machine right next to it. And I just felt like we were part of it all. All at once, the view lost its meaning. (Thom Yorke, Radiohead, quoted in Smith 1995, 14)

Musical fashions, such as Madchester, are notoriously fickle and short-lived, even after being sustained by often loosely-related bands, as noted above. Sometimes this fickleness reflects the bands’ own limitations—The Happy Mondays split in 1993 after a number of well-publicised drug problems, The Stone Roses took five years to release a follow-up to their 1989 debut album. At other times, fickleness reflects the insatiable desire for novelty amongst music journalists. Recently, in spite of talk of a Madchester revival (*Vox* 1994) through bands such as Oasis, fashions have been based upon youth and feminist politics (‘Riot Grrrl’) and musical re-invention (‘New Wave of New Wave’ or the ‘Mod Revival’). However, returning to Maffesoli’s ideas, the ephemerality of these musical genres also reflects the ephemerality of neo-tribes. As Bauman puts it:

Their existence is transient and always in flux. They inflame imagination most and attract most ardent loyalty when they still reside in the realm of hope. They are much too loose as formations to survive the movement from hope to practice. (Bauman 1992, 137)

Neo-tribes constantly struggle to survive because the self-consciousness of the community they engender is often ultimately self-destructive as its limitations

become apparent. However, Maffesoli's emphasis on 'lived spaces' with their own 'emotional geographies' enables us to distinguish between emotional geographies which remain in the 'imagination' and those which become materialised 'on the ground'. Drawing on Lefebvre (1991), it can thus be suggested that it is in the latter case that the neo-tribe will have the greatest chance of longer-term survival. Only by producing a distinct space can a neo-tribe survive; and this space needs to be material if its associated routines and forms of behaviour are not to contradict and clash with the routines and forms of behaviour of a rival imaginative geography.

Even with the establishment of a sound and varied infrastructure which went beyond music (for example, Joe Bloggs fashions), Madchester was pronounced 'dead' by 1991–2. Madchester ultimately failed to produce the space required for its sustained structuration. This is perhaps unsurprising given the shallowness of the music, with its hedonistic immaturity, and the failure to link the music sufficiently with broader aspects of everyday life and experience. In this light Madchester can be compared unfavourably with other neo-tribal groupings, such as 'New Age' travellers, who appear to display a more developed sense of identity (for example, see Hetherington 1992; Lowe and Shaw 1993).

Alternatively, we can interpret Madchester's failure to create a lasting space as the inevitable consequence of being a part of an intensely capitalist music business. Here, we need to consider the extent to which Madchester represented an attempt at a radical subversion of the music industry (Bloomfield 1991). Following Adorno, Bloomfield argues that such subversion requires the musical form to embody within itself tendencies opposing music-as-commodity. On the one hand, Madchester displayed such tendencies, most notably in the hedonistic anti-work ethos of many of its bands and adherents. On the other hand, Madchester—as with all other popular music genres, from punk to rap—became increasingly commodified as its popularity grew, ultimately dissipating into the popular music industry mainstream. Put slightly differently, the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984, 1993) of the bands' and adherents' neo-tribal exclusivity was displaced by the 'economic capital' of the music industry, thereby undermining its neo-tribal potential. As Bloomfield notes:

It is clear that while formations of production and consumption of popular music may run counter to the broader mode of production in capitalism . . . they do not overturn fundamental economic structures. Nor do the cultural objects containing formal contradictions that such formations produce do more than resist for a time the commodification of the musical object. . . . there has been a pattern that music which at first expresses opposition to the social order is then inexorably commodified by the capitalist structures of production. (Bloomfield 1991, 79–80)

Nonetheless, whilst Madchester itself 'died', the cultural nexus of which the music was part evolved to feed into the creation of a more powerful neo-tribal grouping: the 'Raver'. Rave culture is now widespread throughout Britain, although its geographical pivot is probably Southeast England. For many adherents, Rave seems to be no longer just music but a whole way of life: clothes, attitudes, language, the media's 'Generation X'. Moreover, this neo-tribe has assumed an increasingly political tone, spurred on by the Government's clampdown on illegal raves in the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act and the contacts between Ravers and 'New Age' travellers, with their eco-anarchist ideas, symbolised by the Castlemorton Festival of 1992 (Bailie 1993; Lowe and Shaw 1993). In other words, neo-tribes originating largely through regional musical identity *can* evolve to assume

much more national political and cultural significance. The degree to which this significance can be sustained against capitalist commodification—the extent to which Thom Yorke’s view can keep its meaning—remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Our dip into the Manchester popular music scene of the last 15 years has suggested how the fragments of popular music used in the construction of neo-tribes are both formed and sustained through specific geographical (and historical) contexts. Indeed, reflecting the heightened importance given to place and geography in postmodern theory (Dear 1988), a geographical perspective is essential for understanding contemporary music-based neo-tribes and complements the more historical and sociological perspectives presented by other studies of popular music. Lastly, however, it is important to re-emphasise that popular music does not spring unproblematically or independently from place and should not be over-romanticised. Thus, future academic work must combine the strong sense of place advocated here with a delineation of the capitalist elaborations which accompany the ‘musical elaborations’ (Said 1991) displayed in genres such as Madchester.

Notes

- 1 ‘Madchester Rave On’ was the title of The Happy Mondays’ seminal 1989 single (Factory Records).
- 2 Popular music is extremely difficult to define. However, what is generally being referred to in this paper is music: disseminated by national media organizations both to mass audiences and to specialized audiences . . . (Crane 1992, 71)
- This definition is broader and more fluid than one resting on content style and values which, as Bourdieu (1984, 1993) outlines, is often more reflexive of differing class habitus than any more ‘objective’ sense of differential worth.
- 3 Our arguments in this paper are largely restricted to Britain, particularly Manchester, for space considerations, although there are some references to North America.
- 4 This link can be rather spurious, created for marketing purposes, as in the ‘indie’ arms of major labels, such as Virgin’s Hut label, which has bands on its roster such as Wigan’s The Verve, or Parlophone’s Food label, which has Blur.
- 5 A similar geographical sensitivity appears to have fed into a recent series in *Q Magazine*, entitled ‘Maps and Legends’, which gives a geographical description of key musical cities (for example, see Black 1994 on San Francisco in the late 1960s).

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