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Introduction

Special issue on popular music and disability

My hands are shaky and my knees are weak
I can't seem to stand on my own two feet
Who do you thank when you have such luck?
(Elvis Presley, 'All Shook Up', 1956)

The uncontrollability of the pop body has been a persistent feature since its early days. From 'All Shook Up' in the United States and Johnny Kidd and the Pirates' 'Shaking All Over' (1960) in Britain, songs about uncontrollable neurological tremors, as physical symptoms conflating the ecstasy of sexual attraction and of dance, are heard from rock and roll on – and are themselves prefigured in the pleasure and fear of the transcendent body in the jazz and dance musics of the *first* half of the twentieth century as well. There are identifiable and powerful links between popular music and the damaged, imperfect, deviant, extraordinary body or voice, which can be, and surprisingly often *is*, a disabled body or voice; these links have been overlooked in much critical writing about popular music. The purpose of this special edition of *Popular Music* is to explore the common cultural and social territory of popular music and disability, which has been a hitherto neglected topic. This edition of the journal is situated at a nexus of disciplinary or sub-disciplinary concerns: disability studies, popular music studies (including musicology), cultural studies, performance studies, gender studies, and theory. It is intended as a timely musical contribution to the critical dialogue of recent years around disability culture, as one corrective to popular music studies' relative silence here.

From disability studies, Colin Barnes reminds us that an 'element in the development of disability culture and the arts that should not be overlooked is the relationship between disabled people and the "entertainment" industry. Historically, people with perceived impairments or "abnormalities" have provided an important source of entertainment for the non-disabled majority' (Barnes 2003, p. 12). Such entertainment ranges from nineteenth-century freakshows to twenty-first-century performance art, and there are now extended academic studies of each of these (see, respectively, Thomson 1996, 1997; Fahy and King 2002; Kuppers 2003; Sandahl and Auslander 2005, for instance). So disability studies has indeed begun to formulate a body of work that is becoming more than a 'subfield in literary criticism and cultural studies', as Rosemarie Garland Thomson called for not that many years ago in her groundbreaking book, *Extraordinary Bodies* (Thomson 1997, p. 16). Indeed, cultural disability studies is now a recognised field, with its own dedicated journals, book series published by academic presses, and research centres and networks. What there still is not though is detailed critical, historical or theoretical work on disability and popular music. There have been a few recent works on music and disability, notably Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus's wide-ranging 2006 collection of academic essays, *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, and Oliver Sacks's 2007 neurologically oriented collection of case studies, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*. However, neither of these admirable books is focused on the

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body-centred form of popular music (though there is significantly more pop in Lerner and Strauss than in Sacks). It is also perhaps indicative of the state of play within popular music studies in the context of disability that a significant number of the contributors to this special issue are early career researchers or doctoral students: this is a new-ish field for popular music studies, and, pleasingly, some of the people leading it are new scholars.

Some musical groups explore and return to tropes of disability over lengthy pop careers. To offer one illustrative example, the Who stuttered the attitudinal voice of English youth in 1964's 'My Generation' ('People try to put us d-d-down'), sang and acted 'That deaf dumb and blind kid [who] sure plays a mean pinball' in the film *Tommy* in 1975, while guitarist Pete Townsend was widely reported when he spoke out recently about the experience and the dangers of rock music-induced hearing impairment: 'I have unwittingly helped to invent and refine a type of music that makes its principal proponents deaf' (quoted in Anon 2006). From another perspective, some pop musicians have displayed a fascination with the otherness of disability: Morrissey on BBC television's weekly chart programme *Top of the Pops* in 1984, singing 'Heaven knows I'm miserable now' while controversially sporting a Johnnie Ray-era hearing aid and National Health Service glasses, Kurt Cobain being pushed onstage in a wheelchair and hospital gown at the 1992 Reading Festival, the is-she-or-isn't-she-blind music press debates about eyepatch-wearing British singer Gabrielle in 1993.

The essays that follow cover a number of important areas for cultural disability studies in the context of popular music. There is critical discussion of pop songs or live or mediated pop performances, and of ways of presenting the disabled singing body in a variety of popular music styles and historical moments (including Connie Boswell, Johnnie Ray, Ian Dury, Ian Curtis). There is emerging work on what we can think of as disabled musical *forms* and their related (sub)cultural practices (early jazz, punk rock). Where relevant to understanding the performative or musical strategy employed by a particular artist there is a focus on the specificity of certain disabilities or impairments (deafness, restricted mobility) or of medical conditions and contexts (polio in the twentieth century, epilepsy). There is a cluster of essays that deals with the place of pop in music therapy, the use of adaptive technologies in order that people with disabilities can make music, and the cultural contribution of popular music within disability arts more widely. Finally, running through many of the essays is a questioning of ways in which the popular music industry manages and markets its artists with disabilities. How are the industry's codings of enfreakment negotiated, presented, diluted, denied, in musical and visual terms, as well as for audiences?

On a Sunday afternoon in October 2008, when I ought really to have been writing this introduction, I was instead flicking through the Sunday newspaper over a late breakfast, trying to avoid the finance pages. I picked up one of the free magazines, the *Observer Music Monthly*, and read an interview with polio survivor Neil 'Shakey' Young, which included a photograph of him with polio survivor Joni Mitchell; I glanced at a short photo-feature on rock 'n' roll suicide Kurt Cobain and at another on 1980s Smiths-era Morrissey; I read an article on the thirty-year career of visually impaired Malian couple Amadou and Mariam, in which they talked about how 'music gave us the strength to overcome the blindness' (quoted in Adams 2008, p. 53); I read a review of a new Robert Wyatt album, which included a photograph of Wyatt smoking a cigarette in his wheelchair, and a review of a Hank

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Williams compilation; skimmed an article that mentioned polio survivor Ian Dury's album *Do It Yourself*, and another in which Wyatt was referenced again. All this in one unthemed magazine. While I thought I was not doing my research on popular music and disability, here I was doing it all the same.

The point is one that disability studies has taught us compellingly: the moment we begin to look for, to discuss disability (in popular music), we find it *everywhere*. Whether in its focus on bodies perfect and deviant alike, the romantic appeal in rock lyrics and lives to tropes of suffering or cognitive impairment, its damaged voices, its continuing status as expressive vehicle for emotional autobiography (from artists and audience members), its intermittent fetishing of enfreakment, or in the place of pop repertoires in music therapy or disability arts, in fact pop is a profoundly dismodern (Davis 2002) cultural formation and practice. My hope is that the essays in this special issue of *Popular Music* will continue the process of illustrating, understanding and interrogating that important observation.

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