Popular Music (2014) Volume 33/2. © Cambridge University Press 2014, pp. 341–342
doi:10.1017/S0261143014000026

Conference review: popMAC 2013

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Academic discourse through text is a very beautiful thing: there is a sensation of time travel to be experienced through the well-articulated arguments of our academic colleagues. But reading others' work, past or present, is always one-way communication. An academic paper is like a recording of a great song – it's a fixed point in time whose sound will live on long after the band breaks up. A conference is more like a gig, or perhaps a jam session; there's a real-time interaction that the 'recorded' object can never capture. It's a chance to meet those scholars whose work we admire, and to take issue with those whose arguments we may wish to question. It's an environment where we get together en masse and admit to each other the self-evident and humbling fact that is fundamental to all academic research, but is often absent from our publications – *there are some things we're just not sure about*.

PopMAC 2013 was a first for the SMA, for Liverpool and the first for many years for our discipline – an entire conference devoted to the analysis of popular music[1]. Philip Tagg (who also presented a paper) has previously categorised academic approaches according to a 'muso' rating, describing a **music and nothing else** regime and an **everything except the music** opposing viewpoint – whether to study the fish or the water that surrounds them. Although the popMAC papers seemed to favour hands-on musicology rather than cultural studies, there were some outstanding presentations of both types during the week, and a small number that were simultaneously both 'musical' and 'contextual'.

Our venue was the Liverpool's 'Central Teaching Hub', a suite of four impressive lecture spaces on the university's main campus. Accommodation was in Liverpool's student halls at the new Vine Court campus, and the functional rooms were made all the more habitable by proximity to the lecture building and wall-to-wall Wi-Fi – a prerequisite for conferences these days, especially for the increasing number of scholars (including me) who can't get through a day without tweeting about it. Our hosts, Kenneth Smith and Michael Spitzer, welcomed us to the Institute of Popular Music and began with the all-important establishment of conference etiquette, asking all speakers to keep to time and to accept that room-hopping during parallel sessions was to be expected and encouraged. I've seen conferences where this wasn't worked out at the start and it has led to bruised egos and ill feeling. Thanks to Kenneth and Michael's input, popMAC proceeded in an atmosphere of mutual respect and good timekeeping.

The opening keynote was from the University of Oslo's Anne Danielsen, whose work on microrhythm is fascinating to me and to many others. We listened in detail (by which I mean microsecond-level detail) to Destiny's Child's *Nasty Girl* while Anne guided us through the interacting micro-level polyrhythms at play in the track. Her conclusion, that the listener is a co-producer, perhaps a co-creator of musical meaning, is one that was explored further in Allan Moore's keynote the following day. Allan's scholarly work has long argued for a listener-centric form of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143014000026 Published online by Cambridge University Press

music analysis, and his apposite example, this being Liverpool, was framed by a question: 'Who is singing Love Me Do?'. We listened to the first 11 bars or so of the song, with its parallel-mixed Everlys-style vocals, and Allan provided us with (yes!) a score-based transcription of the four possible interpretations of what we might hear as the 'main melody'. There was considerable disagreement in the room about the 'right' way to hear it – a lesson in listener subjectivity if ever there was one.

Ah yes, The Beatles. The Shakespeare of our field. No popular music conference in Liverpool would be complete without some Fab papers, and there was an unsurprisingly strong showing at popMAC. Philippe Cathé provided literally graphic evidence of the band's harmonic evolution over a seven-year timescale; Craig Morrison attempted a taxonomy of implicit meanings in their musical gestures; and final keynote speaker Walter Everett analysed their early demos and recordings as they moved from being 'concertisers' to early-career recording artists in 1963. There was even a chance for delegates to take the famous Magical Mystery Tour around the city on the first day.

Predictably, for the 150 or so of us that were there, projects were planned, networks strengthened and international friendships rejuvenated. The food was good, the coffee plentiful and the balance of work, rest and pub was perfect. The IPM organised a party for us all on the first evening, which included a wonderful performance by Liverpool-based a cappella trio Barbieshop. The staple 'Mr Sandman' was a useful reminder to us all that there was some great popular music being made before the 1960s – although their version of Radiohead's 'Creep' was the show-stealer. An open-mic session downstairs demonstrated that rumours of the death of popular music have been greatly exaggerated. Coincidence-victim of the week was Leeds College of Music's Katherine Williams, who had intended to leave the party early to make sure she was fully prepared for her presentation (entitled 'This Record is Dedicated to Me: Rufus Wainwright's Ego'), only to discover that the exit door was blocked by one Rufus Wainwright, who had called in for a drink after his show at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall. Katherine's paper went ahead as planned the following day; Rufus will need to wait until she publishes her findings to learn how his ego has been spatially placed in the stereo soundfield.

Acknowledging the implicit divide in popular music scholarship between the 'everything except' and the 'nothing else' camps, I took heart from the remarkable interdisciplinary discussions, between musicologists and cultural theorists, performers and sociologists, philosophers and producers. We have a lot to say to each other, and although the album will be great when it's released, you can't beat hearing the material at a live show first.

Joe's popMAC 2013 experience can be found on his personal blog at joebennett.net/category/popmac/.

Endnote

1. *Popular Music: The Primary Text* (Ealing, 1992) appears to have been the first.

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