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Middle Eight

Three is the magic number

PETE ASTOR
University of Westminster

Conference report. Studying Music: An International Conference in Honour of Simon Frith, University of Edinburgh, 10–12 April 2014

'Three is the magic number', as De La Soul would have it and three, as Dave Laing deftly pointed out in his paper, is invariably the number of points Simon Frith will raise when reasoning and arguing an issue. This kind of clear thinking and light touch characterised the feel of the conference as a whole, echoing De La Soul's 'delicate preaching', and 'phrasin' Fred Astaires', as well as serving to remind delegates of the importance of looking and thinking about music in a way that favours clarity of expression over theory-heavy jargon. The magic of threes also provides a highly seductive way of looking at the conference itself. But, be warned, the magic number can be addictive ...

Pace Frith, I would identify three key areas that emerged in the conference. Firstly, the aforementioned uses of Low Theory in the study of popular music: as Dave Laing noted, the strength of Frith's approach is the way that theory is synthesised and applied in his writing, so the reader does not have to negotiate a meta language in order to understand what is being said. Secondly, as Keith Negus pointed out in his paper, one of the great values of Frith's thinking and approach is that it has remained 'deliberately unsystematic'. This means that there is no comforting and totalising lens through which every subject must be viewed, but it allows for nuanced and humane judgements to be made. Thirdly, as befits a music journalist, something like – whisper it – a common sense approach to music informs all discussion: this means that the music fan, while being stretched, challenged and even troubled by what Frith says, will always retain the central sense of what it is to love and care passionately about the music itself.

The three papers in the plenary session on the first day set the tone for the conference, raising issues that continued to be explored throughout. Titled 'Theory and the Field', the session began with Keith Negus' 'Struggling for Fun and Being Cheerful – Reflections on Frithism, Embedded Theory and Popular Music Studies', which continued the struggle for useful and workable approaches to the central idea of the conference itself: studying popular music. Fittingly, the paper began with a short personal narrative (as does *Performing Rites*), which anchored Negus' ideas in lived rather than theorised lives. In it he described how, 'I went for a long walk along the river, and had one of those "What am I doing? Why am I here?

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Shall I do something else?" moments' (Negus 2014). He then details the help that Frith was to him, both personally and theoretically, being generous both with his time and his thoughts.

The central point of Negus' paper was the idea of 'theory that is embedded in musical life' (Negus 2014) as part of the talk and ideas that people use when trying to understand their experience of music. And that the tools of theory, 'ideas from Marxism, from literary theory, from musicology, from semiotics, sociology are embedded within the text, within the writing without needing to leap out as jargon loaded vocabulary' (Negus 2014). Negus also directed us towards a review by Frith of *Rock Over the Edge*, a collection published in 2002, and especially in relation to Lawrence Grossberg's 'Reflections of a Disappointed Popular Music Scholar' (2002). In it, Grossberg referred to what he saw as Frith's 'anachronistic empiricism' (2002, p. 42) at the same time as the book itself bemoaned the lack of a 'theoretical baseline' (Beebe *et al*. 2002, p. 2) in Frith's work. In an interview in 2002, Frith states his position very clearly:

> To describe a musical event in such technical terms is to do nothing of any interest if that description isn't then used to illuminate the music in a quite different way, not using the technical terms [...] to be a good critic you have to be a good writer, whatever descriptive style used, you have to be able to bring a piece of music to life, to make it interesting, to enhance or demean it, or whatever, in ways that just, for that moment, depend on the words on the page. (Rubio, 2002)

This was a theme that ran through much of the conference, including as it did many attendees who had, like Frith, begun their involvement with music as rock critics, which meant that their involvement with music was first as a fan and then as a participant in the music world, in step with its belief systems. The results of this were twofold. First, writing for its own sake was something embedded in a journalist's practice: to be unclear or inelegant was not part of their job description. Secondly, having participated in the music world from the inside meant that they experienced and understood at first hand what it is to be a *believer* in music, leading to a subsequent level of reflection of a far more valuable sort than that undertaken by an academic approaching popular music purely from the cultural studies perspective.

Dave Laing's paper followed on from Negus, identifying and examining the importance of low theory ('which might be the only neologism in the Frith oeuvre' [Laing 2014]) in Frith's work, and how this was 'key to an understanding of popular music' (Frith 2007, p. xi). What Laing (2014) also stressed was the way that low theory was nonetheless still theory, 'compelled by necessity to draw key terms and assumptions from high theory, from the more systematic accounts of art, commerce, pleasure and class that are available' (Frith, 1987, pp. 461–2). But again, the point is that these ideas are processed, synthesised and applied, rather than sitting atop what is being said in the manner of intellectual body armour, in the manner deployed by Grossberg *et al*.

The third plenary paper was Kyle Devine's excellent and thorough 'Music and the Sociological Imagination: Pasts and Prospects', in which he provided a detailed overview of the sociology of music, alerting the conference to the work of the previously neglected John Mueller and causing much scribbling in notebooks among attendees – one was reminded of the exact same appetite in record collectors, hungry for the brilliant and obscure. The paper itself also occasioned a typically challenging question from keynote speaker Robert Christgau: in it he asked what three (of course)

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particular phrases used in the paper meant; his amused disingenuousness highlighting his point that, for all his knowledge of language and music, the sociology-specificity of the phrases meant that he could not understand them. There followed an explanation of 'the politics of citation', which, to any strangers that may have been in the room at the time, might have summed up Christgau's point rather well.

At the heart of the conference were the events which took place on the second day: Robert Christgau's keynote; a plenary session with the three Frith brothers; and an evening concert featuring Fred Frith, Chris Cutler and Tom Arthurs. Christgau's title went right to the centre of the conference's main concerns: 'Journalism and/or Criticism and/or Musicology and/or Sociology (and/or Writing)'. In it, the charmingly irascible 'dean of rock critics' outlined *his* Frith, one that Christgau valued most highly for his rock journalism. Perhaps it is New York *vs*. Edinburgh and Great Britain, but it was hugely refreshing to have someone ignoring the supposed mores of polite British 'culture' to say exactly what they thought, and damn whether it's convenient or politic:

> Simon Frith is such a good friend of mine that I couldn't review *Sound Effects* if I loved it as much as I wish I did. But what that meant was that I preferred Marcus's *Mystery Train*. [...] I didn't agree with all of Simon's ideas then and I don't now. But every one of them set me thinking. (Christgau 2014)

This last sentence is key: it could indeed be seen as testimony to the potency and longevity of Frith's non-journalistic work that the conference itself was taking place. Either way, it was Christgau's focus on the value of good writing that mattered and his quotation of Frith's description of The Chi-Lites' 'Have You Seen Her' that brought us back to the central reason why we were all here: the music!

In the Frith Brothers' 'What Are We Doing When We Are Listening To Music?' each took 10 minutes to address the question in typically elegant ways: Simon deftly teasing out new questions on the social aspects of listening; Chris performing, as he put it, the Nigerian Railways Manoeuvre, and illuminating the question from his own particular field of cognitive science; and Fred, approaching the question with the winning obliquity of the improvising musician, telling us about the long, silent listening walk he takes his students on as a way of beginning to unpack what we do when we are listening. It is hard to do justice to all the questions raised by each; suffice it to say that each strand was fertile enough to seed whole new conferences, not to mention the general thought that attendees must have had along the lines of: 'wow – what a smart family!' The evening concert was a deep listening experience with Frith, Cutler and Arthurs creating a pulsing, shifting soundscape which over its seamless hour-long duration stretched our ideas and conception of what music can be (and, *how* we listen). Chris Cutler (2009), talking about his improvisatory work with Frith as part of Henry Cow, explains it thus:

> Where composition superimposes a past onto a present, improvisation – when it works – is pure, unencumbered, present – a vehicle for the transfiguration of time. We would leap from the struggle with our pasts into these pools of forgetting. By not looking where we were going – and not trying to go anywhere in particular – we collectively stumbled, throughout our career, into impossible, beautiful and unrepeatable music, unaccountably conjured out of the space between ourselves and our contingent public.

The organisation of the event itself was exemplary, concentrating on the kind of concrete realities that allowed the attendees to mentally do exactly as Cutler describes,

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but in the right room! The conference was organised by the Reid School of Music, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh; the Academic Committee was Matt Brennan, Sara Cohen, Dave Laing, Lee Marshall and Peter Nelson and the organising committee consisted of Matt Brennan and Peter Nelson (with the very able help of Simon Frith's PhD students).[1] Matt Brennan's charming and light-handed housekeeping announcements were particularly notable, as was the inspired idea of giving out a different 7″ single with each conference pack, which delegates were then able to DJ at the first night's drinks reception, sponsored by *Popular Music*. This quality of organisation and order also meant that it was very refreshing to see speakers across the conference being mindful of their timekeeping, facilitated by the chair of each panel session also keeping a close eye on the time, which made the presentations stimulating and engaging as well as allowing a good opportunity for questions and debate following each. I happily don't recall any of the uncomfortable moments where the hapless chair tries in vain to attract the attention of a 'heads-down' speaker and the audience has to watch the long minutes pointlessly slip away. This also meant that one was able to ping between panel sessions without causing too much disturbance if there was a paper that one particularly wanted to see between sessions. Taking into account the fact that it was (scientifically!) impossible to see all the papers, here is a necessarily subjective set of presentations that – to me – captured the spirit of Frithism™ best.

The first group could be said to belong broadly to those that embrace the writerly qualities so evident in Frith's work. Ninian Dunnett's 'How Tall Was Lou Reed?' was an object lesson in providing a highly entertaining, but equally thought-provoking presentation of issues of 'truth' that we come across when studying popular music: in this case, the apparently simple question of the title unlocks a Pandora's box of myth and disinformation. Paula Hearsum in 'You Don't Want to be Reading all that Stuff by that Simon Frith' took us elegantly on the journey of a music critic to academia, a road increasingly more travelled, and one that, as was demonstrated by Hearsum, leads to a deft and valuable quality of expression: how often have we, as teachers, found ourselves recommending academic texts to students knowing that we were sending a blameless and delicate innocent into a steaming quicksand of jargon and obfuscation, perhaps never to return? Devon Powers ended the conference with 'What Hath Frith Wrought? Towards a Future Writing about Popular Music', and keyed her stylish paper off with a story of a worried and nervous student in a similar position to the one alluded to above. Special mention should also go to Adam Hanson's '"Why do words have songs?" Writing and Popular Music in the Contemporary Novel', which exemplified (perhaps because he was a member of an English Literature faculty) an interdisciplinary and jargon-free approach that was most refreshing. Claire Coleman, unwittingly sharing a title with Hanson, delivered a paper which teased out an idea of Frith's that has proved very fertile when thinking about music: namely, the performed quality of the lyric in popular song, which moved the emphasis away from any lit crit-style content analysis and allowed researchers to approach the song lyric in a much more useful and fertile way. This facilitated Scott Henderson's '"They Blew Up the Chicken Man in Philly Last Night": Springsteen, the "Faux-cal" and the Search for the "Real Thing"', where he examined the importance of place in Springsteen's music as a way to apprehend ideas of authenticity in his music; this being another key area of popular music that Frith has provided invaluable bedrock ideas for understanding.[2]

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In the second broad category there were papers that demonstrated radical, passionate arguments to open up discussion on complex and important issues in the music world. Helen Reddington's 'Whose Voice is it Anyway?' highlighted the ongoing problems of male gatekeepers standing in the way of the kind of democratisation that the advent of laptop technology should have allowed a far greater access and support to female artists and producers than it has. Tom Perchard, with 'New Riffs on the Old Mind-Body Blues: African American Rhythm and Music Theory in the 21st Century' subtly examined the knotty issue of music analysis in relation to the aforementioned music styles. He also raised one of the best laughs of the conference (not least from the formidable Mr Christgau himself) when characterising a particularly dry and mathematical piece of graph-laden analysis of a repeated bass line as of the 'No kidding!' variety. Lee Marshall, with 'On the Value of Popular Music', focussed on a very interesting and fertile area, picking up from the central concern of *Performing Rites*, namely looking at music's changing 'worth', especially in the current, post-digital musical climate.

The third group of presentations, while in no way wanting to undermine their seriousness, could perhaps be grouped under *That's Entertainment!* John Street presented a compelling account of 'Prize Fighting: Simon Frith and the Politics of the Mercury Music Prize', recognising that despite a degree of naysaying and disdain sometimes directed towards it the prize is actually genuinely important in promoting cultural excellence – again, this idea following on from Frith's examinations of value in *Performing Rites*. Dai Griffiths' '"I ain't been to no music school": Simon Frith Goes to Art School' focussed on Frith as collaborator in his book with Howard Horne, *Art into Pop.* As Griffiths promises in his abstract, he aims to be 'funny, interesting and above all argumentative'. He did all these things in abundance, at one point treating us to a grim piece of reactionary anti-art blues-lite by Dire Straits: 'In the Gallery'. Finally, Chris Atton provided a virtuoso lecture on 'Between the Notes and the Social: What Can We Learn from "Unpopular" Music and its Audiences?', guiding the audience through complex intellectual turns with a maverick commitment and magnetism that reminded one of nothing so much as a Mark E. Smith of the lecture platform! In conclusion, the speakers worked so well at the time and in the moment that they also begged the statement that the witnesses of the best live events will always make when unable to properly explain what happened: *you just had to be there!*

Finally, the late scores on Conference Bingo just in: the two big Bs were the main players, with the favourite Bourdieu gaining an early advantage, making an appearance in Gerd Keunen's very first paper, but the old contender Becker came up strongly with a late challenge, gathering numerous mentions as the conference continued. But of course, as Paula Hearsum suggested in her paper, it was the F factor which dominated: long may Simon Frith's non-systematic, low theoretical approach define the way we listen to, look at and study popular music.

Endnotes

1. Tomke Veenhuis, Tom Western, Joe Stroud, Adam Behr, Kieran Curran, Richard Worth, Sean Williams, Tami Gadir, Arnar Thoroddsen, Cormac O'Callanain and Anne-Marie Martin.
2. Post-Frith, the idea of authenticity as a construct may be a given, but we should never forget how, for all we as academics understand this, 'authenticity' is often not seen as such by many undergraduates (and musicians).

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