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Introduction: The Critical Imperative

The Critical Imperative is a call for writing about popular music that places primacy on sounds as made and heard, and which is styled in a way that foregrounds not just academic rigour, but also imaginative description, creative interpretation and daring evaluation. While criticism is increasingly marginalised in the mainstream media, many writers and readers have constructed new spaces for musical reflection online – and this discourse, as sophisticated as it is public, represents a challenge to academic work on pop ensconced behind university paywalls. Of course, scholarly methods have their own virtues, and the eight essays that follow have taken up the challenge of marrying deep research and reflection with lively critical language, direct argument and formal experiment.

However, this is not just an exercise in style: it's an investigation into how we think and write about music in new intellectual and publishing contexts. Since the kinds of critical approaches we are considering are inseparable from the financial and attention economies amid which they have emerged, it's important to begin by considering how the monetised internet has reset the relationship between readers and writers, journalists and scholars.

What many see as a contemporary crisis in critical discourse was dramatised in January 2016, when Kitty Empire – one of the UK's comparatively few broadsheet pop critics, and one of the most insightful – was assigned David Bowie's *Blackstar* release. Empire's 400-word *Observer* review appeared just hours before Bowie's death, which was unexpected to all beyond the artist's inner circle. The writer's piece was dutiful, formed of factual information and only the vaguest interpretive gestures, with Empire suggesting the songs betrayed 'little obvious connection other than unease' (Empire 2016a, p. 26). However, Bowie's passing, announced the next day, sent millions to *Blackstar*, and prompted what amounted to a crowd-sourced mega-critique: numberless online commentaries, authored by professionals and amateurs – by devoted Bowie specialists and me-too hacks – together described in great detail the record's lyrical and symbolic portrait of an artist approaching the end. It seemed so obvious in retrospect, and, her expertise called into question, two weeks later Empire used her column to provide an apologia for her first review: she had only been permitted two pre-release listens in a PR office, the writer complained, and an interpretation based on the artist's ageing had seemed too pat (Empire 2016b, p. 31). Even with so little to go on the column had needed to be filled, the *Observer*'s authoritative judgement handed down.

SPIN magazine had seen it coming as early as January 2012, when an editorial opined that music reviews as they had been known, 'once presented as an imperious edict', had become redundant in the internet age.

> Tight security on major-label albums (and practically *no* security on indie-label albums) often means you're downloading a leaked album the same day as your favorite magazine or website. The value of the average rock critic's opinion has plummeted now that a working knowledge

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of Google can get you high-quality audio of practically any record, so you can listen and decide for yourself whether it's worth a damn. (Weingarten 2012)

SPIN's response to this new cultural situation was to launch a Twitter handle through which the site's writers would post 140-character reviews. The experiment may have been tongue in cheek, and was anyway short-lived, but the point was well made. Since then the situation has only intensified, further upsetting the established dynamics of authority across the world. In Italy, where pop music criticism has existed since the 1950s, bloggers take magazine and newspaper journalists to task for exhibiting superficial knowledge of indie music scenes, despite the renown of their publications (Varriale 2016: 193–4). In Denmark, a 'thriving online cultural public sphere' of music and other critics has altered the terms and practices of cultural debate, and has improved perceptions about the quality of writing one might encounter online (Kammer 2015).

Meanwhile, surprise albums, music streaming, live-tweeted award shows and social media feuds have brought popular music fully into the throttle of breaking news, and all but the nimblest journalists have trouble keeping pace. This is the internet cult of the hot take: even as experienced writers are laid off by the dozen, media platforms are obliged to provide appraisals that matter – in terms of meaning, or just clicks – and at a speed that can at least match the onslaught of social media commentary. Real-time criticism may populate platforms with a steady stream of fodder for our distracted moments, playing into the web's relentless demands for the new. Yet doing so often presents real dangers, and not just accidents of error or rushed judgment. For the gaffe-prone, the careless or the marginalised, the costs of off-the-cuff commentary regularly spiral out of control, with reputation, career and even safety at risk. Online, there are no true delete keys, and few second chances.

Looking for ways out of this hostile new environment, over the last decade many professional critics have sought a new place in the university, whether as professors, contingent labour or students aspiring to full-time academic employment. The jobs are tempting, but so too are the ways that academic writing on popular music comes into the world: the long-gestating thought, the editorial processes that offer relative freedom from market demands and the safety of a careful screening. Even when they find a vehicle for their work, jobbing critics can rarely observe the standards of sourcing, argumentation and pre-publication testing that gives academic work its claim to credibility and its nuance.

That comes at a price, and cool scholarly takes become merely cold when writing falls hostage by the requirement to keep all bases covered and escape routes available. Many who have run academic publishing's gauntlet complain that this caution – often reinforced by the peer review process – can elevate word count while limiting ambition, scope and argument; many readers know the frustration when exhaustive qualification crowds out provocative judgment, or the weight of citation and scholarly precedent flattens an original interpretation. It's true across the disciplines, and popular music studies has earned its place in the university through subscription to these standards of precision and care. Yet that alignment also marks a rejection of the demotic, sometimes radical critical discourses through which writers, fans and players have for a century intertwined popular music's sounds and meanings.

As editors of this special issue, we are not positioned to erase the inequities that continue to plague pop music scholarship and the larger critical world it inhabits. Nor can we upend the norms of critical practice that have shaped and are reshaping academic and journalistic writing. Far more modestly, *The Critical Imperative* has sought

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to establish a space that might accommodate this new influx of critical nous, and where pop writing's two tendencies – let's crudely call them the reactive and the reflective – could co-exist. It's perhaps unsurprising that several of the writers represented in this issue cut their critical teeth online. Yet we did not call for the simple translation of blog practice into the academy any more than we demanded a total overhaul of scholarly technique. Instead, we invited essays that foregrounded academic research and rigour that would be out of place even in the most assiduous journalistic writing – but which also promised the imaginative description, creative interpretation and bold evaluation that has always characterised the best journalistic pop commentary. We wanted to see if authors could find ways of acknowledging and working with the extant literature on their subjects without letting long reviews of that work sap their writing's energy; whether linear narrative and cumulative argumentation be productively disturbed or fragmented; how the exhortation to explore new kinds of expressive and descriptive vocabularies might lead writers into innovative areas of thought.

All of that is present across the eight essays that comprise this collection, and which themselves span a wide range of musical and writerly styles. We have welcomed experimentation and licence as vigorously as we have discouraged formula and argot. There are no long literature reviews and few cautious conclusions; the language is loose, the structure sometimes looser. Different writing required different kinds of peer review, and the back end of the project was in its own way as experimental as the published texts. We'd like to offer a special thanks to our anonymous reviewers, all of whom saw immediately what we and the authors wanted to do: rather than add paragraphs of fudge, or citations of semi-relevant arcana, often they demanded writers cut, and goaded them to be bolder. Yet sometimes they left unchallenged writing that, while it might not have contributed anything as determinate as an argumentative gambit, instead reflected a critical attitude, even ambience, that produced its own kind of meaning. So the finished essays challenge standard strategies of academic reading – where the goal of the critical reader is often to expose argumentative fallacies or demand knowing reference – by refusing such tidy rhetoric. Where elsewhere lapses of this kind might be viewed dimly, here we contend that a certain level of dissonance helps challenge ideas about what scholarship can be.

When we set out to edit this issue, we were inspired by Ellen Willis, who possessed an unmatched ability to write clearly, thoughtfully and yet magnetically. In Willis, we also found a feminist pioneer who began writing about music at a time when there were few women doing the same, and whose activities and influence bridged journalism and academe. Thinking about her example, we wanted this issue to represent not only the new possibilities of popular music writing, but also the range of voices doing so. Several of our contributors are early career scholars or para-academics, and their work speaks of a broad range of subjectivities and experiences. Yet our attempts to more fully balance the issue, especially in terms of geographical origin and gender, were frustrated. We share this not to make excuses, but rather to admit the obstacles that persist in realising and accentuating diversity within popular music criticism, especially within an academic journal.

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We begin with Stephen Graham's piece, 'The X Factor and reality television: Beyond good and evil'. For Graham, that British pop show represents 'the best and the worst of neoliberal capitalist culture', its 'weirdly sincere fakery' a morality play in which the audience can conjure real attachments, formed via real, if bounded, participation.

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Pop music, turned into must-see TV, frames a style of politics that 'contributes to the neoliberal marketplace, yet it also provides a shared language, platform and an intense collective gaze that might add up to something like solidarity'. Robin James frames the politics of pop differently in her article, 'Is the post- in post-racial the post- in post-genre?' She contends that the concepts of post-identity and post-genre both mark 'the preference for incorporating all differences into one heterogeneous mix over sorting different phenomena into internally homogeneous segments or subgroups'; despite this, some manifestations of diversity remain suspect. Because being 'post-' requires 'rejection of a prior commitment to exclusivity or purity', mixed race people or 'traditional' forms of genre hybridity aren't understood as such – so Taylor Swift can 'Shake it off' but Bruno Mars cannot.

Nabeel Zuberi's contribution, 'Listening while Muslim,' continues the interrogation of the relationship between identity and musical production and reception. 'After 9/11 many have become "Muslim" in unforeseen ways whether they wanted to or not', Zuberi writes. He draws from his own experience as a non-observant Muslim to consider what it means to be Muslim when a particular situation, or sound, demands it: 'There might be a lesson here for how music hails its listeners and calls them into becoming, to feel what others are feeling, to reflect on the stakes and costs of musical exchanges, and to never take the inhabitation of identities – musical or otherwise – for granted.'

Simon Morrison's 'Dancefloor-driven literature: subcultural big bangs and a new centre for the aesthetic universe' excavates the fiction writing that arose alongside the British rave scene of the 1990s. Morrison sees the dance floor 'as breeder of stories and systems'; music formed a vital 'sonic architecture' which backboned the culture and validated its lore. Texts such as *Disco Biscuits, Trip City* and *Trainspotting* created a subcultural canon, where the chemical frenzies of dance music infused, animated and enabled the written word. Morrison's piece both recounts and channels those energies.

Two very different articles meditate upon two very different kinds of jazz. Tom Perchard's 'Mid-century modern jazz: music and design in the postwar home' endeavours to 'capture the surfaces, textures and moods' of a homebound, mediatised jazz in the 1950s and 1960s: the music's symbolic and sonic characteristics helped it gain entry to the ideal modern home, yet some of its oppositional meanings – political, social, aesthetic – could make it a troublesome guest. In the second jazz piece, 'Deceptive rhythms, negative space, circuits of meaning', Thomas Brett uses the 2013 album, *Dysnomia* by contemporary experimental group Dawn of Midi, to prompt an investigation into to the writing of musical experience. *Dysnomia* is an experimental, even disruptive record; its rhythms frustrate expectation and it subverts traditional jazz forms. Brett's essay works to communicate 'the interplay of sound and listening action through my felt orientations within one musical performance's kaleidoscope expanse' – creating a sort of phenomenology of listening.

Adam Harper's essay, 'How internet music is frying your brain', has a tongue-in-cheek title, but one that speaks to the 'ambivalent aesthetics' of the music created on computers and distributed online: so-called 'internet music'. Such music inverts common criticism of the internet's effects though an almost obsessive championing of the digital: it 'represents a way of making and of listening to music that plays up to particular narratives about the supposedly degenerative effects of culture's mediation through the internet, smartphones and digital simulations'. Internet music provides a platform for thinking about the changing nature of humanness online, as well as the ability for music to effect, support or throttle those kinds of changes.

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The final essay is D-M Withers's 'Playing with time: Kate Bush's temporal strategies and resistant time consciousness'. Withers considers how Kate Bush's use of 'conceptually analogue' practices of musical production intervene in the listener's experience of time. For Bush, the decision to create music that reflects the affordances of old analogue technology is 'a ventured interest, an artistic tactic that enables her to forge concepts that are at the centre of her creative project'. Withers also uses the essay to reveal their own affective relationship to Bush's recordings. In response to *Director's Cut*, a remaking of previously recorded songs, they write that we are 'encouraged to contemplate the studio practices the artist deploys to re-work what, to Bush's great many long-time listeners or fans, is an already-familiar collection of songs'. In thinking about music listening as memory, Withers embraces the challenge of reassessing the familiar and remediating the past.

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One closing remark. For a century, popular music critics have been preoccupied with a triad of concerns, around music's socio-cultural importance, its form and its feeling. Pop's academic writers have followed suit in thinking hard about the first two. But somehow we've rarely got to describing how pop listening feels. These essays show pathways in that direction, and they dally on the way with some suggestive what-ifs: what if academic writers felt freer to embrace and report pop music affect? What if in our writing we articulated our biases and penchants, voiced our joys and agitations, and allowed our writing to extend the evocative power of music? We have implored this issue's contributors to allow themselves to come through in their work, not to encourage solipsism, but to account for the inability to disappear completely – especially in the face of music, which, as David Hesmondhalgh (2013: 2) writes, 'represents a remarkable meeting point of intimate and social realms'. We are proud of the pieces collected here, and we stand by the critical imperative that sparked them. Yet rather than offering them as exemplars, pioneers or even trademarks of a 'new' popular music writing, we present them as *essais* in the true sense: attempts to find a way into that remarkable space, and then to listen, read, think and write across it.

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