

## Essay Review of Simon Frith's *Taking Popular Music Seriously*.

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### **Introduction**

Simon Frith's *Taking Popular Music Seriously* is itself to be taken seriously and enjoyed. Like his *Performing Rites* (1996), the book under review here is full of valuable insights about music. It's thought-provoking and thoroughly readable. It's also useful to have so many of Frith's key texts in a single volume.

Whoops! I tell my students never to start with a conclusion unless it's formulated as a question or hypothesis. I've broken that rule here because the structure of this review is influenced by the book's treatment of issues central to the future of musicology. That means I need to first get the review's formalia, including the obligatory warning part of the product description, over and done with. If I do that, of course, I have to tell readers how good the book is before mentioning its shortcomings. After those formalia I'll try to summarise the book's contents, sometimes reacting personally to what I'm describing, and I'll conclude with a discussion of the book's implications for musicology.

### **A few problems**

There is in my view mercifully little wrong with *Taking Popular Music Seriously*. The few faults I've found are mainly editorial and the first one, related to style, isn't really a fault at all. That 'non-fault' is nevertheless worth mentioning because it connects with ethical aspects of our job as academics in music.

Every author has mannerisms and Frith is no exception. For example, he seems to love I WANT TO... as a marker of authorial intention. Personally, I have no problem with his I WANT TO... because, by choosing to assume neither the pseudo-objectivity of the omniscient and anonymous author, nor the patronising consensus implied by the academic 'we', Frith is, I think, not just being honest. His I WANT TO... encourages the reader to engage personally with the text and to be an equal 'me' in dialogue with the author. Indeed, as Frith states in the introduction (p.xi), '[e]ach of these essays had a polemical purpose. Each challenged developing orthodoxies...' Since that sort of text demands involvement, personal and intellectual, from author and reader alike, I WANT TO seems quite appropriate. I must admit, on the other hand, that I do find 'what is x is y' constructions, for all their efficiency as emphatic markers in everyday speech (e.g. 'What is important here is the survival of the planet') clumsy in writing, and, like 'looking at' an issue rather than 'examining' or 'discussing' it, such turns of phrase sometimes smack of teacherese. That said, it is worth remembering three things: [1] that public educators in contact with a broad readership are duty bound to make themselves understood; [2] that public educators have to face issues of concern to the popular majority rather than those belonging to the intellectual or artistic canons of the ivory tower; [3] that confronting those popular issues raises serious questions about what we actually do in academe, what we study, how we study it and how we write about it. This third point, it seems to me, is what taking popular music seriously and *Taking Popular Music Seriously* are all about. That, in turn, is why what some readers may see as stylistic weakness I tend to see as strength.

In fact I only have one major quibble with *Taking Popular Music Seriously*: its poor edit-

ing into a collection of selected essays. A quick glance through the book reveals pages scanned in from various sources with an array of disparate font styles and sizes. This visually jumbled impression of a volume cobbled together during a lunch break might have had some documentary purpose if only other, more substantial, parts of the editing task had been carried out properly. I am referring here to two really annoying and unnecessary problems.

[1] Frith often writes about the present or recent past, and readers wanting to follow his ideas need to know which 'today', ranging from 1978 to 2004 (the period from which the book's nineteen chapters are selected), they're dealing with because 'recent trends' in 1978 or 1987 or in 2008 (my 'today' today) are not the same. To get your historical bearings and understand Frith's argument you have to break your reading flow each time and consult the Table of Contents. I can't understand why the editors didn't include the original year of publication in the header that they've in any case added to the top of every odd-numbered page.

[2] The Table of Contents just identifies each chapter's title, its year of publication and the page it starts on. The problem here is that if, like my research students, you need to make bibliographical reference to the original publication, you have to turn to the Acknowledgements section and locate the title in question. That isn't as easy as it sounds because titles in that section are presented in alphabetical order of publisher, a data item most readers need to look up in the first place! I cannot understand why the editors did not include original publishing data in the Table of Contents or at least present the publishing acknowledgements in either chronological order of publication or in alphabetical order of essay title. Failing that, the original publication data could have been added to the top of the first page of each chapter. It took me over two hours to sort out this mess for the purposes of this review and I will put an Excel file online to save others from having to waste their time.

Four other minor points need mentioning. First, it's frustrating to read 'the theories outlined in the last chapter' (p.16) when that 'last chapter' isn't in the book you're reading. Second, I don't know why the nineteen chapters appear in the order they do: it's neither chronological nor alphabetical and, if it's thematic, I have yet to fully fathom its logic. In fact it's probably best to treat the book not so much as a concept album as a sampler of Frith singles. Thirdly, 'America' is used as if the USA were the only nation state in America. I'm not suggesting that 'America' be changed to 'USA' any more than 'Afro-American' be changed to 'African-US-American' in previously published texts but I do think an 'awareness-of-Anglocentrism' clause should have been included in the introduction. The fourth and final minor point is that the volume contains a few typos, only one of which is critical: Andrew Chester's *intensional* is spelt *intentional* in a context where the difference between *s* and *t* is vital (p.269).

### ***Commented summary***

Discussing the book's contents is much more rewarding than pointing out its editorial flaws. I've already hinted that Frith's writing style is popular in the best sense of the word: complex theoretical argument is easy to follow because those issues are presented in a disarmingly readable way: it is *scholarly*, not *scholastic*.

The value of *Taking Popular Music Seriously* has, I think, two main interrelated aspects: documentary and intellectual. I will devote the rest of this review to the latter after simply noting that the book's documentary value lies in allowing the reader to see not only

changes in Frith's own thinking about music and society 1978-2004 but also to understand the various orthodoxies circulating during the same period.

**Chapter 1**, 'Youth and Music', from *The Sociology of Rock* (1978) has its empirical base in research conducted among young people in a small Yorkshire town. That research gives rise to a discussion of age and gender issues, of music's character of leisure *activity* rather than as mere 'consumption'. This 1978 text contains the book's first (indirect) challenge to musicology because music for the population in question was the main 'focus', the actual 'point' and 'content' of leisure rather than its 'garnish' (pp.15-22). This indirect critique of conventional musicology is accompanied by a critique of subcultural theory's tendency to see football as interchangeable with music as a leisure activity and its inability to explain the relevance, not only of particular musical sounds but also of other symbols, to the subcultural identity under discussion. Indeed, *why* did mods go for scooters, not mountain bikes, and for US rather than British army jackets? Why Northern soul and not Tyneside R&B? Or, as I asked in the mid nineties, why is so much techno in the phrygian rather than the lydian mode?

The title of **Chapter 2**, "'The magic that can set you free": the ideology of folk and the myth of the rock community' (1981) says it all. After an incisive show-down with the leftist idealisation of 'folk music' on U.S. college campuses, this chapter basically traces the process whereby *rock 'n' roll*, a working-class phenomenon of the 1950s, became the middle-class commodity *rock* in the mid sixties — a 'romanticised... fantasy community of risk' (pp.39-40).

I will not insult readers by summarising the familiar contents of **Chapter 3**, 'Rock and Sexuality' (1978/79), co-authored by Angela McRobbie. It is a piece which has since become required reading in gender and popular music studies, gaining some notoriety for having launched *cock rock* as a genre label among academics. That said, I'd like to remind readers, especially musicologists, of the comparison between Tammy Wynette's *Stand By Your Man* (conservative lyrics) and Helen Reddy's *I Am A Woman* (politically correct). Why, the authors ask, does Wynette come across as so much more in command (and hence more feminist) than Reddy? They also criticise Kate Bush but praise Millie Jackson respectively for their musical treatment of lyrics about sexual pleasure. Whether or not I agree with Frith and McRobbie's interpretation of the music they discuss (I don't think they're fair to Kate Bush) is not the point. The point is that I have, at those three places (about Wynette/Reddy, Bush, Jackson) scrawled 'MUSICOL!' in the margin, by which I mean: where on earth were we musicologists when Frith and McRobbie needed help identifying and naming aspects of musical structuration contributing to their perception of the recordings just mentioned? After all, the issues they raise are hardly less important than what most musicologists think they have to agonise about!

**Chapter 4**, 'Afterthoughts', from *Rock on Record* (1985) discusses the useful notion of two-way 'possession', particularly sexual, between fans and their idols (possessing and being possessed by the latter). One sentence deserves particular mention:

'Whether in the teenybop education of desire, sixth-form miserabilism (from Leonard Cohen to the Smiths), the Springsteenian community or torch singing, the best records (the ones that give most pleasure) are the ones that allow an ambiguity of response, letting us be both subject and object of the singer's needs (regardless of our or their gender).' (p. 63)

**Chapter 5**, 'Formalism, Realism and Leisure' (1980) uses confusion about the values of punk (radical or just petit bourgeois?) to unpack notions of leisure, consumption and ideology, as used in cultural studies, sociology and political science. This article is theoretically astute, clarifying important contradictions like those between leisure as the rational re-creation of labour on the one hand and as freedom from the constraints of labour on the other (except of course for housewives and what that exception means in terms of musical fare). As for 'consumption', in Marxist theory it simply denotes, writes Frith,

'a moment in the circulation of value, [while in] recent art and literary theory it refers to a kind of pleasure, [and] in historical sociology... to an institutional process. Cultural theories of consumption are left in a muddle.'

Frith is right. It's almost worse than 'tonal' or 'functional' in musicology, words whose meanings vary among musicologists, depending on their field of interest as well as on the national culture they belong to. In fact it seems to me that many disciplines need to clean up their terminological act, but as long as careers can be made inside 'schools' and subdisciplines, the muddle will continue. We need people like Frith to shine a light on conceptual confusion and on the intellectual mess it causes and which causes it.

**Chapter 6**, 'Art vs. Technology: the strange case of popular music' (1986) and **Chapter 7**, 'The Industrialisation of Popular Music' (1987), contain extremely useful and well researched historical overviews of technology's role in increasing music's expressive potential. In fact Frith goes a step further, explaining how microphones are a prerequisite for notions of authenticity in popular music, and how amplification and multi-channel mixing were essential to the production and dissemination of 'rock spontaneity'. Chapter 7 also provides a concise but multi-faceted historical account of the music industry in the USA and the UK but stops in 1987, two years after Nintendo launched *Mario Bros.*, the year I bought my first synthesiser, the time when CDs became the main audio carrier, when samplers became affordable, just five years before the MP3 format was launched, just ten before internet file sharing became commonplace, etc. How I wish that Frith's insights could help me sort out these last twenty years!

**Chapter 8**, 'Playing with Real Feeling' (1988), explains the changing status of jazz in (white) Britain from the early 1900s (minstrel shows, etc.), via Paul Whiteman (US) and Jack Hylton (UK) to the 1950s. My father's favourite British prewar band (Ray Noble) was not in Frith's account but Henry Hall, one of my Dad's pet hates, was. Hall's inclusion in this historical account is useful because that bandleader's commercial, populist and racist take on jazz, ('as weird and as Jewish as Schönberg') helps Frith clarify the changing social status of jazz elitism from the 'slumming upper class' to

'the aspiring petty-bourgeoisie, who were soon organising themselves (in good suburban style) in rhythm clubs, celebrating jazz fandom as the culture of collectors and scholars, people who took the music *seriously*.' (p.133)

Frith deals well with the projection, by middle-class British (white) intellectuals, of their alienation on to jazz, concluding that 'black [US-] American music [came to stand] for a simple idea: that everything *real* is happening elsewhere.'

Suburbs serve as segue into **Chapter 9**, 'The Suburban Sensibility in British Rock and Pop' (1997), which, I was surprised to find, knowing a little about the author's musical tastes at the time, makes no mention of either The Pet Shop Boys or of their *Suburbia* (1987). No matter, because this article uses the case of Britpop (Oasis, Blur, Suede) to

underline the importance of England's suburbs, and of the alienation they seem to engender among their young middle-class inhabitants, in the development of new trends in popular music. This chapter elaborates ideas presented in Frith and Horne's *From Art into Pop* (1990) where the fake proletarian rebel behind British punk and rock is unveiled and the art school suburbanite is revealed. Or, in Jon Savage's words:

'Pop (and rock's) rhetoric is of the inner city, but scratch the surface of most English pop stars and you'll find a suburban boy or girl, noses pressed against the window, dreaming of escape, of transformation.' (cit. p.139).

I was intrigued to learn that Bromley, just one among hundreds of London suburbs, produced not only David Bowie but also Siouxsie and the Banshees as well as Billy Idol. Suede, I also learnt, hail from Haywards Heath, an even more dormitory agglomeration of London commuters. Now, I don't like suburbs and Frith tells us that Siouxsie hated Bromley, but suburbs must have something to offer if they're fertile ground for innovation in pop. That 'something', if it exists, is not examined in this book.

THE MORE IT'S NOT US, THE GREATER ITS VALUE is a theme carried over into **Chapter 10**, 'The Discourse of World Music' (2000), where easily identifiable but palatable difference is the order of the day. The role of academics in creating the discourse under discussion in this chapter is important.

'The relevant academic expertise for world music marketing was ethnomusicology, and if one result was the scholar as deejay, anthologist, journalist and writer of blurbs, another was the record company boss as scholar, engaged in his or her own fieldwork, developing his or her own theories of musical movement and exchange.' (p.151)

Of course, there are elements of the folk 'Other' at play here in a situation where the music of nomadic or agrarian 'noble savages', the conventional hunting ground for ethnomusicological safaris, is virtually extinct as a cultural projection commodity for alienated Westerners, and so the hunt is now on for listenable *urban* 'Otherness'. That new commodity must, it seems, fulfil other unspoken criteria of 'authenticity' for, as Tim Taylor remarks (cit. p.151), Cantopop and karaoke are excluded from the world music canon. Another authenticity-related element in world music discourse is that record labels, writes Frith,

'are highly informative about the musical source of their releases, about local musical traditions, genres and practices, but they are highly uninformative about their own activities – the process through which music from Mali reaches a record store in Middlesbrough is not explained.' (p.153)

Indeed, details of licensing, payment and rights are absent from the world music discourse Frith criticises. Nor, he continues, is there any mention of the effects of the world music boom on the communities and individuals, mostly in the developing world, who produce the music on offer to us, and on how that boom can radically change the social, cultural, economic and technological premises on which the production of world music 'authenticity' ultimately depends.

**Chapter 11**, 'Pop Music' (2001), is one of my favourites. Starting with Elton John's rendition of *Candle In The Wind* at Princess Diana's funeral, Frith notes that the applause the artist received in Westminster Abbey on that occasion was not 'for being sincere... (his business alone)... but for performing sincerity...', a performance of grief in which we could all take part' (pp.167-8). The author does not follow up the implications of this observation so pertinent to the nature of pop (professionalism, singability, clear identification of individual artist[s] in control, established song form with clear boundaries

between itself and other communicative events, including other songs, etc.). He does, however, register the fact that 'pop music' is a residual category, the residue being what is left over after genre labels have been stuck on to everything else. (In that sense it is like 'popular music' which I've always found easiest to define residually as music until recently excluded from academic institutions of music and still an exception inside their walls.)

Chapter 11 also includes valuable insights about Europop (including Abba), about pop divas, about the preponderance of love and other pathos-related lyrics, about children's music, Christmas music and about hymns. These decidedly 'uncool' subjects are treated with the respect and seriousness their popularity and usefulness democratically demand. What is more, I consistently fail to understand, as an academic, how we're to make sense of all the cool exceptions to the supposedly uncool norm without grasping the nature and workings of the uncool norm. After all, no-one would claim to understand the the workings of standard modern English by focusing on Shakespeare, avant-garde poetry or gangster slang, but music scholars specialising in Monteverdi, Boulez, Charlie Parker or gangsta rap will often talk with stupefying confidence about what music should and should not be. Simon Frith is not one of those 'specialists'.

**Chapter 12**, 'Look! Hear! The uneasy relationship of music and television' (2002), is a short article mainly about the problems of visualising musical performance on the small screen. After dispatching the late 1980s academic fad for applying postmodernist theory to pop videos, Frith provides a mainly economic and technological history of the problem in the USA and Britain, discussing difficulties with televising opera but missing one obvious point, maybe because it's *too* obvious. I'm thinking here of how the TV equivalent of close miking – a camera close-up – is totally incongruous when the diva filling your TV screen is bellowing unmiked so that listeners fifty metres away in the opera house balcony can hear what she's singing across the orchestra pit and the stalls. Conversely, what you actually see from the opera house balcony would make for lousy TV, even in high definition. In short, the two spaces are acoustically, visually and gesturally (hence also musically) incompatible. Frith is definitely back on track with his account of pop and rock on TV. The step from (faked) stage performance to (faked) club milieu is illuminating, as are his remarks about TV as the ideal medium for dramatising musical processes and argument. That observation encourages me personally in my new-found enthusiasm, as a musicologist, to go on producing YouTube edutainment clips.

In **Chapter 13**, 'Music and Everyday Life' (2003), Frith pulls together observations about muzak, musical silence, musical branding, musical nuisance factors, musical identity, music making and socio-musical order to draw some important conclusions about the centrality of music in daily life. For example:

'It needs stressing that what people listen to is more important for their sense of themselves than what they watch or read. Patterns of music use provide a better map of social life than viewing or reading habits. Music just *matters* more than any other medium.' (p.205)

**Chapter 14**, 'Why do Songs have Words' (1987), is perhaps best summarised by its start and end. It first deals with content analysis and the predictable pronouncements on banality such analysis tends to produce. It ends with quotes from Elvis Costello and Marcel Proust that Frith comments as follows.

'What is at issue is fantasy – the problem of romantic ideology is not that it is false to life,

but that it is the truth against which most people measure their desires'. (p.234)

The path from start to end, too detailed to summarise here, passes through fruitful discussions of lyrics in relation to mass culture, realism, 'the music' and poetry.

In **Chapter 15**, 'Hearing Secret Harmonies' (1986), Frith enters the realm of music and the moving image. The essay starts rather surprisingly with the author's take on cultural capital, on capital accumulation and taste, but this part of the chapter allows Frith to explain why media (including music) scholars need to 'take seriously their own experiences of texts, their own contradictory positionings...' They should move, he continues, 'from a high cultural to a popular cultural mode of analysis' (p.244). That initial conclusion brings up 'the Barry Manilow problem', i.e. that, despite their better (?) selves, 'even the wariest of listeners can have their "heart strings pulled"' because, Frith adds, he makes the sort of music that often comes at the end of a Hollywood film. He ascribes three functions to those film theme songs: [1] reinforcing our identification of a tune heard several times during the film, [2] 'summarising the *mood* of an ending' and [3] acting as a nostalgic bridge between the film's fiction and the reality facing us after it's over. The chapter also deals briefly with the semiotics of underscore, one of my favourite topics. I've tried in my own work to answer some of Frith's questions but many others remain unanswered. For example, 'do people "hear harmonies" when they kiss outside films too?' (p.255)

**Chapter 16**, 'Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music' (1987), raises so many issues that it is virtually impossible to summarise, but here are a few of the questions Frith discusses. [1] Why, in analysing art music, do we have to 'uncover the social forces concealed in the talk of "transcendent" values', whereas 'in analysing pop, we have to take seriously the values scoffed at in the talk of social functions'? [2] 'Why is [in 1987] rock 'n' roll youth music, whereas Dire Straits is the sound of Yuppie USA?' [3] Why do Wilfrid Mellers' scholarly appreciations of The Beatles and Bob Dylan read like fan mail in the eyes of a pop scholar and, I would add, why are similarly written appreciations of Mahler or Glenn Gould still accepted in classical music circles?

This chapter also problematises measurement of musical popularity or importance – the fact that '[e]ach different measure measures something different'. Frith's provisional conclusion is that, as specific listeners, our aesthetic value judgements about music relate to 'how well (or badly) songs and performances fulfil the suggested functions' he describes. Key among those functions are aspects of transcendence which seem to enable a different kind of 'self-recognition [that appears to] free us from the everyday routines and expectations that encumber our social identities'. It is a transcendence, he adds, which 'marks not music's freedom from social forces but its patterning by them' (p.268). It is here that Frith makes a direct appeal to musicology. 'What', he asks, 'are the factors in ... music which determine whether it does so well or badly' in fulfilling those social functions? A few pages later he adds:

'We need to understand the lumber-room of musical references we carry about with us, if only to account for the moment that lies at the heart of the pop experience, when, from amidst all those sounds out there, resonating whether we like them or not, one particular combination suddenly, for no apparent reason, takes up residence in our own lives.' (p.272)

If that isn't a job for musicologists, I don't know what is.

**Chapter 17**, 'Adam Smith and Music' (1992), gives a historical and epistemological background to some of the issues raised in the previous chapter. Frith criticises the assumption that interpretative authority is the preserve of a self-proclaimed élite while most of us are tacitly declared incompetent to make viable aesthetic judgements. Then, after critiquing Smith's sometimes mechanistic notion of rationalism and its tendency to produce absurd statements about music's inferiority to verbal or visual forms of representation, Frith underlines the neglected importance of reception (music's users, the aesthetic pole) in creating meaning and value from music. The process of interpretative authority passing from listener/user (aesthesis) to artist/work (poiesis) and back to user has of course musicological implications that I will mention later.

In **Chapter 18**, 'Music and Identity' (1996), Frith resumes the aesthetic argument on a different tack, proposing to reverse the usual analytical model FROM TEXT (SUPERSTRUCTURE) TO SOCIETY (BASE) and turn it into FROM BASE TO SUPERSTRUCTURE. Of course, he has valid theoretical grounds for proposing this dialectic reversal but Frith provides no clear illustration of how the procedure might actually work. Still, drawing on Mark Slobin, he does come up with at least one useful clue, 'the mobile self', in his discussion of the relationship between, on the one hand, the notion of *becoming* intrinsic to musical flux and, on the other, the subject as social object 'playing and hearing what sounds *right*' in any given musical community.

Chapter 18 also contains the only Frithian tour de force I've allowed myself to include in this book review. He presents two music reviews, one about rapper Spoonie Gee, the other about Milton Babbitt. Each text is the linguistic, cultural and stylistic polar opposite of the other. And what is Frith's point?

'[T]he overall shape of the review[s] is the same — the move from describing the music to describing the listener's response to the music to considering the relationship of feeling, truth and identity... [I]n both cases the critics seem to know better than the artists what they are — or should be — doing.' (p.298)

That, in my view, has nothing to do with postmodernism. It is a straightforward intelligent observation about interpretative authority in two spheres of music that convention would have us believe share nothing in common.

The final **Chapter (19)**, 'What is Bad Music?' (2004), is another of my favourites. It starts with two pages of hilarious quotes in which writers pour scorn on music they hate. Frith has thankfully no intention of telling us what makes for bad music but he does go some way to explaining the sort of arguments different people use in different situations to justify their disapproval of particular types of music. To put it in Frith's own terms, '[m]y question is not what is bad music but what is "bad music"?' His answer comes in the form of a tentative typology of the various criteria we seem to use to qualify music as bad. Using my own terms, I understand the operative categories of disapproval Frith discusses to be: [1] poietic, i.e. objections about music's production (formulaic, standard, just a cover, etc.); [2] aesthetic, i.e. arguments against the music's effects (corrupting, immoral, dumbing, etc.); [3] social, involving conflation of [1] and [2] (incompetent, unprofessional, self-indulgent, inauthentic, inappropriate, insulting, etc.). Indeed, the insult and anger we feel when subjected to 'bad music' can only be matched by the vehemence of the insults and anger we hurl back at it. As Frith points out, however, 'it is clear that the music itself is not really the issue' but rather how the music, which we might like under other circumstances, is used by who for what purpose. 'Bad music', in other words, always involves a conflict of control and values (not



to mention acoustic territory) and identifies the individual decrying that music a socially active. And that, basically, is how both the chapter and the book end, the paradox being that 'the egocentric music aesthetic' we've inherited from classical pundits and pop fans (the folder 'My music' comes as standard with Windows) 'is driven by a passionate desire to make people listen differently... Even as the musical experience has been individualised, it has remained necessarily and undeniably sociable.' (p.332).

### ***Saving musicology from extinction***

*Taking Popular Music Seriously* is a conceptually expandible title implying that we should also take 'serious' music 'popularly' or, rather, that all music, popular or unpopular, is a serious issue because of the central role (whether 'serious' or 'fun') it plays in human life. Frith documents and explains music's importance from various angles in his writings, focusing mainly, but by no means exclusively, on the workings (production, structure, perception, uses, meanings, values, etc.) of popular music in the English-speaking world. This key aspect of Frith's perspective – music's irrefutable importance in everyday life – presents musicology, as we institutionally know it, with its most important challenge: if music is so important to people and if most of that music is either 'popular' or used 'popularly' (Classic FM, etc.), then how come 90% of my fellow musicologists still choose to devote themselves either to music from far-off times and places (the BUXTEHUDE OR BA-BENZÉLÉ BUT NOT BARRY MANILOW syndrome) or to exceptions to, rather than examples of, the musical norm of the media-saturated society we live in (the PIERRE BOULEZ OR ANTHONY BRAXTON BUT NOT JOHN BARRY syndrome)? It's easy to point the finger at institutional inertia and intellectual sloth, but that is not very constructive.

Part of the problem relates to Frith's notion of interpretative authority and to the link between the high-priests of aesthetic value (classical, folk or popular) and to the institutions or corporations they knowingly or unknowingly serve. Cultivating the 'right' musical habits becomes a matter of socio-economic as well as of cultural power, of claiming sovereignty over a sociocultural territory. Everyone has to negotiate a place in these territories and musicologists are no exception: our relation to established patterns of cultural authority (the status quo) affects our ability or inability to respond constructively to the changing technological, intellectual, cultural, educational and ethical demands that the reality of this media-saturated society, like it or not, makes on us all. Let me provide one example of this problem.

Encouraging motivated and talented musicology graduates to do a popular music PhD is often an uphill battle because the students in question are intelligent enough to realise that theirs will also be an uphill battle as lone popular music specialist in institutions where exceptions to the norm outside the ivory tower are still the rule. Musicology PhDs specialising in popular music will almost certainly attract a lot of students to their classes and generate income for their institution but that success can also strike terror into the hearts of conservative colleagues whose student numbers are falling and who fear losing their status, their credibility, or even their job, as universities become increasingly entrepreneurial. To allay that fear, musicologists of the popular must constantly compromise and justify the legitimacy of their subject on the curriculum. Moreover, musicologists of the popular also face serious difficulties in the rat race of academic publishing, mainly because they need to cite music under copyright and because legislation in that area makes publishing that sort of research an absolute night-

mare.<sup>1</sup> Given all these problems (and more), it's so much easier to regress into the relative institutional comfort of Buxtehude, Boulez or the Ba-Benzélé (the status quo) than to pay the rent and feed your children by working as a musicologist of the popular. It can even be advisable to abandon university life altogether, as one of my best PhD students recently decided to do in order to take up a relatively interesting and well-paid bank job. Of course I was disappointed because I was really looking forward to his findings about non-tonal processes in rock, but I could find no fault in his decision. It's a vicious circle: the less young musicologists specialise in popular music, the less the system will change unless those of us who have some kind of musicological authority do something about it.

One obvious and immediate step towards change is for established musicologists to encourage and assume supervisory responsibility for talented graduates wanting to specialise in popular music. 'But I'm not an expert and I don't even like it' is the usual excuse I hear. Sorry, but, as someone working in the residual field called popular music, I've had to supervise, and willingly undertaken to do so, research into things I either disliked (like Queen and *Bohemian Rhapsody*) or that I knew next to nothing about (like Cantopop, trumpet mouthpieces, the flamenco scene in Montréal, industrial music and Country yodelling). I'm happy to report that all six of the students in question completed their dissertations successfully and that all but one of them now has a full-time music job, three of them in universities. That's why I fail to see how 'I'm not an expert' can ever be a valid reason for refusing to take on popular music research students. After all, the supervisor's job is not to know all the empirical details – that's the student's job – but to ask the right questions, usually of the deceptively simple sort that Frith so often poses in his work and which he has, I bet, asked students covering a wider range of topics than I've had to deal with. These 'right questions' help graduate students structure their material and thoughts, prompting them to use models and approaches enabling them to correctly and convincingly explain the workings of whatever musical phenomena they're investigating. However, musicologists face a much more daunting task...

The 'daunting task' relates directly to places in Frith's book where I've scribbled 'MUSICOL!' in the margin, in particular to those passages where, it seemed to me, specifically musicological competence might have contributed to understanding what Frith calls 'the lumber-room of musical references we carry about with us'. I'm referring here to the typically musicological practice of denoting musical sounds in structural terms like 'diminished seventh', 'minor pentatonic', 'additive metre' or 'phase shifting'. This is where the real problems start because, apart from the serious epistemic difficulties of music semiotics, as presented in learned publications during recent decades, musicology, I have painfully come to realise, is in a very sorry state when it comes to one of the things it is supposed to be best at – the *structural denotation* of musical sound. That's a serious accusation, so I had better explain myself.

Apart from the conceptual confusion about words like *tonal*, *atonal*, *non-tonal* and *modal* – and I won't start that discussion here! – musicology has problems with the parameter of musical expression on which it spends more time and energy than any other – harmony. For example, in 2000, when I had to write an encyclopaedia article on harmony, I spent weeks struggling with standard terminology in efforts to distinguish be-

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1. <http://tagg.org/YouTubeFox0710.html#Allies> [2008-05-20]

tween triads (chords containing three notes with different pitch names) based on the superimposition of thirds and those based on the superimposition of fourths. 'Quartal triads' (*c-f-g*, *c-d-g*, *c-f-bb* etc.) was no problem but to which chord category do the 'common' triad and the 'added' sixth belong? To cut a long story short, I had to call 'common' triads (common in whose ears?) *tertial*. I was also frustrated to find myself thinking about the *La Bamba* matrix (*Guantanamera*, *Wild Thing*, etc.) in terms of I-IV-V-V (let's say G-C-D-D) and about the mixolydian matrix (*Sweet Home Alabama*, *Midnight Rambler*, the end of *Hey Jude* etc.) in terms of I- $\flat$ VII-IV-IV (say D-C-G-G) without the slightest clue as to why the root of the repeated final chord of those matrices (the *finalis*) is not the keynote. Imagine the mess I would have made if I'd have tried to fit either of those highly familiar pop harmony matrices into a teleological Schenkerian framework!

Well, if there are cardinal problems with terms denoting harmony, the happy hunting ground of conventional Eurocentric music studies, the mind boggles at the problems of structural denotation facing musicology when it comes to metricity, periodicity, volume, acoustic space, articulation, phrasing, accentuation and, last but not least, timbre. How, indeed, can today's musicologists come up with any valid structural denotation of Tammy Wynette's, Helen Reddy's, John Lennon's, Céline Dion's or anybody else's vocal sound[s]? We can't at the moment but that should spur us on to fill these gaping absences in our discipline's arsenal of terms. The question is how to deal with this serious problem.

At several points in his writings, and from different perspectives, Frith suggests the need to re-evaluate listeners' competence in creating meaning, to consider the aesthetic pole in the act of musical communication rather than relying, as we do so heavily in musicology, on *poiëtic* descriptors (concepts relating to how the sound in question is produced using specific technologies, not to how it is perceived). And yet a term like 'Neapolitan sixth' once *connoted* Naples (all those phrygian flat twos and flat sixes they still use from Seville to Algiers to Sicily to Athens to Istanbul to Cairo and Beirut). Over the years 'Neapolitan sixth', originally an *aesthetic* descriptor (the indexical connection 'sounds like Naples') came to *denote* a particular type of chord, becoming an arbitrary sign, a *poiëtic* descriptor with no indexical link to Vesuvius, steep alleys, the Camorra or mounting piles of garbage. So why is it so difficult for us today to come up with useful aesthetic descriptors like the original 'Neapolitan sixth'?

Well, finding valid aesthetic descriptors will not be an easy task. For example, I once asked Franco Fabbri how to translate 'wet echo' into Italian. He didn't respond right away, so I said 'shshplaaff' and made a wide-armed, all-encompassing sort of gesture by way of clarification. '*Un'echo di Madonna*' (not the singer) was his reply. *Un'echo bagnato* (=wet), it was clear, sounds as strange to Italians as 'a Virgin Mary reverb' does to Anglos. (Yes, I should have said 'reverb', not 'echo', but that's another example of musicology's structural denotation problems I can't deal with here.) Nevertheless, years of teaching popular music analysis to students both with and without formal training in music has convinced me that collecting and systematising recurrent aesthetic descriptors like *bitch voice*, *detective chord*, *Psycho strings*, *high-heeled saxophone* (a.k.a. *sexophone*) and so on, may be the best way of starting to cure musicology's woeful lack of terms denoting musical structures that average listeners find meaningful. This process of terminological improvement, whatever its methodological problems, is, I believe, vital to the future of our discipline but will only become at all workable on three conditions.

[1] We musicologists must break our institutionally imposed taboo on synaesthetic imaging and cultural connotations linking musical sounds to the world *outside* musical discourse (see Frith's reference to Francès' work, p.282).

[2] We must consider the notions of (Baroque) rhetoric Frith mentions in his Adam Smith article (Chapter 17) and view the old orthodoxy of MUSIC IS MUSIC ('absolute music') for what it is – an epistemologically fascinating historical parenthesis.

[3] Most importantly, we must stop underestimating the musical competence of the popular majority and their ability to construct meaning from what they hear. Maybe aesthetic descriptors like *Andean flute* (quena, pinkillo, zamponas?), *Paris accordion* (accordéon musette), *Japanese scale* (zokugaku-sempô: 8-b6- 5-4-b2 [- 1]) or even *USA normality chords* (diatonic bitonalism à la Aaron Copland or Mike Post) might eventually acquire a semiotic history similar to that of the Neapolitan sixth?

It is clear that Frith does not have the musicological answers but he certainly knows the right questions to ask. Therein, for me, lies the great value of the book I've just reviewed. If we respond constructively as musicologists to Frith's challenges, we may even manage to save ourselves from extinction.