

Amsterdam, June 21st - 26th, 1981

International Conference on Popular Music Research

PROPOSALS CONCERNING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR POPULAR MUSIC

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Background

One of the most radical changes in the everyday life of inhabitants of industrialised nations is surely that brought about by the advent of the mass media. Gramophone records, film, radio, television, audio cassettes, videocassettes, etc., have all become part of day-to-day living. The distribution of music via the mass media has resulted in profound changes in the production, dissemination and reception of sound. This development has only recently become a matter for public concern and, as an object of public research, mass-media music is a comparatively neglected area of study.

During earlier stages of social development in Europe and North America, music was, generally speaking, either produced by members of the agrarian community for their own direct use – 'folk music' – or commissioned under various systems of patronage – 'art music'. During the 19th century, composers of what we now call classical music started to appear on the 'open' market while – with various waves of urbanisation continuing until the present day – the social basis for 'folk music' started to disappear. Yet whereas financial responsibility for upholding art music traditions passed at an early stage in this century into the hands of public bodies – mostly state or municipal – no such responsibility was taken for folk music in its radically changed social and material context, at least not in the Western world. This meant that production and distribution of non-art genres passed from its direct makers and users into the hands of the growing music industry. This mass-media distributed music – 'popular music' – with stylistic roots in old folk and art genres as well as in earlier popular styles, has over the past thirty years become an increasingly important and ubiquitous part of the acoustic environment in industrialised societies.

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A parallel to the sort of development described above, in which patronage of art music passed from the 'open' market into the domain of public expenditure and where means of production, storage and distribution of folk music passed from the community making and using this music itself over into the private domain, can also be seen in music education and research.

{p.2} Whereas both practical training and theoretical studies of art music have been catered for by public institutions ever since their inception – we are referring here to departments of musicology, to conservatories, to general music education in state schools, etc. – the practical and theoretical traditions of folk music were either transformed into the national romantic forms of art music or taken over by the growing popular music industry. This meant that folk traditions passed over from collective control into the private domain of mass media companies.

Due to a wide variety of social, cultural, technical, political and economic factors – too numerous and complex to be accounted for here – the overwhelmingly private sector of popular music production and distribution in the 'mixed' economies of industrialised nations has since the 1950s become such an important social and cultural factor that it must be said to have assumed a public character. This can be seen not only in the transnational structure of the large media oligopolies and their production of music, but also in the fact that educationalists, public authorities responsible for cultural matters, non-commercial media organisations, sociologists, musicologists and many others have started to show an increasing interest in popular music. This interest is not only concerned with teaching the practical skills of making popular music, but also with understanding it as a social, economic and cultural phenomenon.

Seen in this historical context, it should be clear that public research into popular music is an extremely recent phenomenon. (By 'public research' is meant that financed by public bodies and foundations or that carried out by individuals outside the private music industry corporations). Such research cannot be said to have started before some of the clearly negative social and cultural aspects of popular music became readily discernible in the mass media propaganda of Hitlerian fascism. Such effects were treated in a general, theoretical and ideological fashion by Adorno and others in writings published shortly after the second world war. However, very few works dealing with popular music from a serious viewpoint were to appear again before the late 1960s when studies of scattered Rock and Roll phenomena, written mainly from the journalist's angle, began to appear. This was over ten years after the 'rock explosion', ten years

after the dissemination of such music via the mass media to teenagers all over the industrial Western world. However, during the 1970s, a far greater amount of depth study has been conducted into different aspects and areas of popular music. These approaches have been many and various, ranging from the journalistic to the sociological, from political to psychological and from semiological to economic.

Although approaches towards the study of popular music may have varied during the 1970s, it is clear that there are many common denominators in the type of material being studied, in the type of problems posed and in the general aims of research. It therefore seems important to organise structured {p.3} contact between popular music researchers outside the privately owned music industry in order to make such research available, either directly or indirectly, to state and local authorities. This entails:

1. finding ways of combining different approaches to similar material with similar aims
2. avoiding unnecessary research overlap
3. enabling popular music researchers to receive constructive criticism and help in their own field of study from others involved in similar or neighbouring areas of research
4. informing popular music researchers of activities in similar or neighbouring fields of study.

Bearing in mind the transnational character of the privately owned popular music industry, it seems important to establish cooperation and coordination on an international level in the public area of popular music research as well. The initial measure taken in this direction is the International Conference on Popular Music Research (Amsterdam, June 21 - 26, 1981).

The second step concerns the foundation of an International Society for Popular Music Research, a matter to be discussed at the conference mentioned above. The object of such a society is envisaged at this stage as providing a common source of information and forum for discussion about popular music across national and disciplinary boundaries. The initiation of such an international organisation would mean increased availability of information on popular music (i.e. everything from Muzak to Punk, from film scores to High Life) not only to those researching such areas themselves, but also to those involved in disseminating knowledge about such phenomena in the public sphere, e.g. to teachers, educationalists, public broadcasters, public cultural bodies etc.