

From Refrain to Rave

The Decline of Figure and the Rise of Ground

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For Maria Tagg, her rave accomplices and their right to party

What, you may well ask, does a polemical piece about rave music have to do with Wilfrid Mellers? A lot, because not only is Mellers one of the first scholarly writers to take pop music seriously while also clearly enjoying it; he is also one of the few scholars to write about pop as though it had something to do with music and as though the music — not just its lyrics or social functions — were instrumental in vehiculating ideas, ideologies, attitudes and patterns of behaviour in a way no other symbolic system can. In fact, without Mellers, I doubt very much whether I would have ever dared write either this or any other piece in which I try, with varyingly limited degrees of success, to relate the structures of music to the society and culture in which and for which that music is produced and used. I underline this aspect of Mellers's work because I am certain I would have abandoned my studies of music in the early sixties at Cambridge if I had not stumbled upon the Mellers parts of *Man and his Music* (1962), an extensive history of European art music which had the audacity to suggest that classical music actually meant something outside itself. In that book, Mellers managed to make links not only between music as sound and the personality of that music's composer, but also between the music, the composer and the world of ideas and society in which classical composers and their music were active. My Cambridge teachers poured haughty scorn on *Man and his Music* and on Mellers but I had found an intellectual ally in musicology, knowing full well, from my experience then as church organist, rock musician and pub pianist (even at the age of twenty), that if I played *a* and not *b* the old Methodist ladies were more likely to cry and that if I played *y* and not *z* the dancers would be far more likely to boogie on down. The choice was between, on the one hand, Palestrina crosswords plus Schenker and the aesthetics of musical absolutism on the one hand, and, on the other, making some sense out of music. Mellers clearly represented the latter for me. Therefore, when trying to make

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1. This article was first presented as a paper at the conference *Rock Steady / Rock Study: sulle culture del rock*, held at the Gramsci Institute in Bologna, 6-7 May, 1993. With hindsight, perhaps it would be more correct to call the sort of music discussed here 'dance' or 'house' rather than 'rave'. Since the generic name of the sort of music discussed later still seems to fluctuate, I have kept the term 'rave' as not only referring to the functions at which such music may be played but also to the music 'itself'. The first paragraph was added a few months later when the editors of *Popular Music* asked for contributions to a special volume of the journal celebrating the eightieth birthday of Wilfrid Mellers. This text was submitted to *Popular Music*'s editorial board whose members disagreed whether this text should appear in their journal at all. After some argument this text was published in 1994 as the journal's first 'Debate' article (*Popular Music*, 13/2: 209-222). Tops of page in the *Popular Music* publication are indicated by numbers between braces, e.g. {210}.

sense out of the *Kojak* theme, Abba's *Fernando*, the representation of 'Nature', 'Time Sense' or 'Death' in music, etc. I have written willy-nilly under the influence of Mellers. Even this piece owes a lot to Wilfrid Mellers because I hope to show how studying the structural characteristics of a certain type of music can tell us about the culture of which that music is such an important part.

More specifically, I want to suggest that rave music — especially techno — differs so basically from rock and roll as regards its musical structuration that old models for explaining how popular music interacts with society may need radical revision. This presentation is polemical rather than authoritative or scholarly: it simplifies and polarises issues that will definitely require further discussion and investigation. The article falls into two interlinked parts: (1) a critique of the 'rockologist' rationale of individuality and (2) a tentative enumeration of rave music's main structural traits. In what follows, I just want to raise questions that I think need to be asked and, eventually, answered. In fact, since this paper follows very few of the precepts I lay down for students, I might as well cast the scholarly mask entirely and start off on a personal note.

In one of our expensive phone calls across the North Sea, my daughter, aged eighteen, told me recently that well-meaning parents in Göteborg, where she still lives, were pressuring local police to put an end to their parties. The musical fare of those parties consists to a large extent of sounds like these:²

- Stereo MC's: *Everything* [*Sabres on Main Street Mix*]³
- Usura: *Open Your Mind*⁴
- Frequency-X: *Hearing Things*⁵
- Snap: *Exterminate!* [*Endzeit 7"*]⁶
- B.M.O: *Mastermind*⁴
- Capella: *U Got 2 Know*³

I shall return to this music later because I think it is highly indicative of recent and important developments in our society and its music. I shall also try and give a few ideas as to how socialisation strategies might be read from the structures of the sort of music we've just heard. Before that, though, let me go on with my story.

The sort of parties my daughter was talking about are those organised semi-privately by individuals like herself and her peers in downtown premises such as vacant clubs, cellars or abandoned cinemas which they rent quite cheaply. They take a small fee at the door and make a modest profit selling beer and soft drinks at about half the price you have to pay in commercial

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2. Thanks to the following persons for help, information, materials and opinions: Expanded Music (Paulino & Alessandra in Bologna), Paolo Ferrario (Bologna), Margit Kronberg (Göteborg), Liverpool Music House (Colin Hall and Gary McGuinness), Angela MacRobbie (London), Maria Tagg (Göteborg), Garry Tamlyn (Townsville) and Sheila Whiteley (Manchester). Thanks to Martin Cloonan and John Lovering (Liverpool) for their frank and brotherly criticism without which this article would have turned out even less convincing than it is anyhow. Please note that the music examples are played as a one-minute collage of extracts from the records listed next in the main text.
 3. On *Megadance - The Power Zone*. Virgin/EMI CDEVP 4, 1993
 4. On *Megadance - The Energy Zone*. Virgin/EMI CDEVP 6, 1993
 5. On *This Is Urban*. Pop & Arts (UK) CD 101, 1990
 6. On *Madman's Return*. Logic Records CD 74321 12851 2, 1992.

pubs and restaurants. They often switch venues and in the summer they run such parties out in ample stretches of the Swedish countryside. In neither summer nor winter do they disturb the general peace because these are not house parties in the strict sense of the word: they are unofficial 'raves', as such occasions are known in Liverpool or Manchester, held way clear of any residential buildings.

So, what do the Göteborg elders really object to? Well, their panic is focussed on the use of 'ecstasy' (MDMA), a non-hallucinogenic, amphetamine-based drug which enhances perception of colour and sound, increases body temperature and creates a relatively long-lasting feeling of accelerated euphoria. Regular use of the drug can cause serious psychosis, depression, lethargy and paranoia. MDMA-related death at rave clubs is connected with dehydration, insufficient ventilation, overcrowding and excessive body temperature.⁷

There are, in other words, grounds for real concern. However, although 'ecstasy' can be a killer, it is unlikely that parents object to raves solely on the grounds that their own sons and daughters will all become junkies just because they may come into contact with those who do take ecstasy: that would be tantamount to suggesting that knowing someone who drinks whisky at the weekend means you'll end up an alcoholic or that anyone who inhaled the smoke from someone else's joint in the seventies ought to be dead by now from a heroin overdose.⁸

It is probably fear of another 'high' that haunts those who would put an end to dance raves, the fear that their sons and daughters (and the society we all populate) are out of their control and that the young people, by organising and participating in these raves, have in fact started to take control over their own lack of control of society. This may sound cryptic, so let me explain.

Reorganisation, thatcherisation, or whatever other label you attach to the brazen capitalism we have experienced during the last two decades, promotes greed as a virtue and propagates perverted notions of a non-cooperative individualism whose buzzwords are 'achievement', 'performance' and 'competition'. Our generation has been encouraged, often against our own will and collective self-interest, to elbow each other out of jobs and positions, to live up to outmoded ideals of family existence, to amass consumer commodities, to run at least one car, to be up-to-date, etc., etc. This sort of socialisation strategy is of course inherent in the totally illogical ideology of today's political economy and has resulted in more than one type of bankruptcy. For not only do thousands of businesses go bust every week, not only do professionals like computer programmers find themselves on the dole with a crippling mortgage and plummeting property prices, not only are

7. Information from the Merseyside Drug Training and Information Centre (phone call 17 May 1993). Massive amounts of the drug are in circulation in the Liverpool area. The drug is sold in the form of capsules, tablets and, occasionally, as powder. Capsules are marketed with different colours and names (e.g. red and black as 'Dennis the Menace', red and cream as 'Rhubarb and Custard') while tablets are stamped with different images, e.g. doves ('love dove'), shamrocks or (as in Sweden) 'Donald Duck'. For a more detailed run-down on rave regulation in Britain, see chapter 'Raving in the Free World?' in Martin Cloonan's doctoral work on pop and rock censorship in the U.K. (Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool), subsequently published as ****.

8. My daughter assures me that she is aware of ecstasy having been present at only one of the twenty raves she has attended or organised in the Göteborg area.

the infrastructures of health, social welfare and public transport dismantled in front of our very eyes, we are *also* faced with an intellectual and spiritual bankruptcy in studies of contemporary culture. In the field of popular music studies I am referring to the corporeal precepts of rockology, to such statements as:

Music excites the body to automatic movement, an exhilaration that defeats boredom and inspires insight Music gives the body control over itself, granting personal freedom and revealing sexual potential. When Madonna says 'You can dance', she *truly* empowers her fans. ⁹

Today, in this post-gymnastic disco, post-AIDS era, what with the arrival of jogging, macrobiotic food, aerobics, work-outs and Californian-style body cult, we have witnessed the obvious promotion of the corporeal from youth subcultural division four to the premier league of capitalist culture. Young US-Americans are not recruited into the marines by Sousa marches but by Van Halen's melodically heavy-metal *Iron Wings* and to the air force by Tom Cruise's crew-cut, bomber jacket and Berlin's melodious *Top Gun* anthem. Vauxhalls are sold to the tune of *Layla*, Fords to ex-Queen guitarist Brian May's *Driven By You*, with all its mega-melodic electric guitar overdubs in parallel thirds.¹⁰

Similarly, Bodyform Plus, one of those items of female hygiene consistently exposed on television as though it were blotting paper, sells neither to the tune of some pleasantly fresh acoustic guitar, nor flute, nor romantic strings, nor women's choir, but to a quasi-orgasmic, melodic line of ecstatic gospel rock that makes Nile Rodgers' pastiche of that genre in Eddy Murphy's *Coming to America* sound quite bland.¹¹

Despite the rise of the rock-corporeal to a hegemonic status during the nineteen-eighties, it was, until very recently, still possible for respected scholars of rock to write as follows:

To find out how rock functions, it is necessary to explore effects that are not necessarily signifying, that do not necessarily involve the transmission, production, structuration, or even deconstruction of meaning. Rock and roll is corporeal and 'invasive'. For example, without the mediation of meaning, the sheer volume and repetitive rhythms of rock and roll produce a real material pleasure for its fans (at many live concerts, the vibration actually might be compared to the use of a vibrator, often focused on the genital organs) and

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9. James Lull 'Popular Music and Communication: An Introduction' in James Lull (ed.) *Popular Music and Communication*. Newbury Park, Sage, 1992: 29-30. As Garry Tamlyn points out in the introduction to his doctoral study on *Rhythmic Organisation in Rock and Roll* (Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool), cultural-theoretical writing on rock owes a lot to earlier, more journalistic and fan-oriented literature on the subject. A recurrent problem with all this literature, both academic and not, is its musicological inaccuracy. Tamlyn cites accounts of the same musical reality described in incompatible terms and cites numerous passages in which the sounds of rock music are labelled or described in affective or corporeal terms for which no empirical evidence exists.
 10. I am referring here to the original 1991 music track of British TV commercials. *Layla* was rearranged classically and minimally for subsequent Vauxhall spots and *Driven By You* was later rearranged semi-classically to sell the Ford Mondeo (1993).
 11. The 'Soul Glow' hair spray spot in *Coming to America*. Paramount, 1988. CIC video (VHS). It is interesting to note that whereas the 1993 spot for Bodyform Plus concentrates visually on *one* woman and uses such an over-the-top melodic line (in fact the 'Bodyform for you' hook also resembles the well-known pomp-rock mega-melodics of 'Gillette, the best a man can get'), the 1993 spot for Tampax shows *groups* of women (pushing a yellow Volkswagen on a beach and playing volleyball) to the accompaniment of rave-style dance music.

restructure familial relations (by producing immediate outrage and rejection from its non-fans, e.g., parents).¹²

Since 1990 Grossberg, who wrote the above passage, has modified this view considerably, suggesting that our own generation's monopolisation of the aesthetics of youth culture, not least through the romanticism of rockology, may well have contributed to the reactionary ideology of the Thatcher and Reagan years.¹³

My critique is therefore directed at the ideas just cited, not at the present position of their authors. Nevertheless, the last quotation is quite symptomatic of much sociological writing on rock in its mystification of musical signification and in its avoidance of the relationship between music as structure and experience. Apart from the 'wink-wink-nudge-nudge' fashion in which it assumes we, readers as well as listeners, all have intimate experience of vibrators, the statement also makes musicological nonsense, as Garry Tamlyn points out.

It implies that the 'vibrator' effect should logically arise when walking next to the bass drum and cymbals in a marching band or when standing at the assembly line in a packaging factory, or when listening to the final scene of Berlioz' *The Damnation of Faust*, because all those soundscapes feature generally high levels of volume and loud, regularly articulated beats in the form of strong bass thuds, sharp crashes etc.¹⁴

Now, rockologists may profess to some knowledge of factories but they would be unlikely to own up to any carnal knowledge of marches, let alone of Berlioz' music, so how rock's rhythms and sounds can be determined as inherently more sexual and corporeal than those of other structurally comparable musics or soundscapes remains a mystery to me. More seriously though, the last quotation actually posits that there is such a thing as 'sheer sound' — some sort of bio-acoustic universal?¹⁵ — that 'does not necessarily involve the transmission, production, structuration, or even deconstruction of meaning'. I take this to mean that rock rhythms and sounds need not be regarded as part of a culturally specific symbolic system and that they vehiculate neither primary nor secondary meanings of any cultural or political value. If this is so, the passage just quoted is an insult to every rock or pop musician and to the all the time and energy they spend rehearsing, doing sound checks, studio retakes and different mixes to obtain *the* sound that says *a* and not *b*. It is also an insult to my daughter and her friends and to the time and energy they spend selecting tracks for their raves. Asked which records they would put on, she told me:

No, we wouldn't play *There's No Limit*, even if it's easy to dance to, because it's cheap and commercial. Real rave-goers aren't just fourteen-year-olds at a disco. They want to feel the music has some point to it as well.¹⁶

In short, vast quantities of the cultural-theoretical verbiage I'm expected to take seriously about rock music's 'rough', 'raw', 'anarchic', 'oppositional',

12. Lawrence Grossberg, 'Is There Rock After Punk?', in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (eds.) *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*. New York, Pantheon, 1990: 113. Thanks to Garry Tamlyn for digging out the last two quotes.

13. The last section of Grossberg's paper at this conference seemed to me to express such a critique of the rockologist aesthetic.

14. Garry Tamlyn 'Rhythmic Organisation in Rock and Roll'. Unpublished doctoral work, Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool, : 10-11.

15. For description of bio-acoustic universals, see P Tagg 'Music and the Case of Death' in *La musica come linguaggio universale* (ed R Pozzi). Florence: Olschki, 1990.

'body-emancipating' qualities may have had some value in the late sixties or early seventies but, please, it is now 1993.¹⁷ Since *Jumping Jack Flash* we've had to suffer two decades of cynical capitalism and serious unemployment, all to the marketing tune of yuppies jogging in designer track suits, of aerobic women sprattling about in pastel-shaded leg-warmers, of misunderstood steroid-inflated men on dubious vendettas and of AIDS-scares. Meanwhile, Madonna exposed her body umpteen times, the media went berserk about Michael Jackson's vitiligo¹⁸ and the unemployment rate went up again. We've also seen the aimless Indiana Jones, the gaudy sado-masochistic acrobats of all-star wrestling, anorexic fashion models, Aryan male bodies with Hitler haircuts in synth pop videos or Calvin Klein adverts and we've been exposed to all those martial-arts-practising career goddesses who wash-and-go with their shiny hair and phoney body confidence. All this amounts to a sort of health-and-action fascism or ideological body terror (and provides me with an oppositional excuse for continuing to smoke). Since the Sex Pistols we've had to witness television's Nintendo presentation of missiles cornering streets to enter Iraqi bomb silos (and killing countless civilians), the demise of the world socialist system and more unemployment. It would be strange indeed if young people ready to take their place in this brave new world needed the same sort of socialisation expressed through the same sort of music and attitude to both body and emotions that rockology saw fit to canonise and to mystify.

Anyhow, rather than rant on at colleagues and what I see as both the ethical and intellectual bankruptcy of the rockologist and postmodernist mystifications of popular music, I will put my own neck on the academic chopping block in the sense that I have chosen to talk about something I know very little about — rave music.

The reasons for my interest in the subject at this stage are (a) that rave is the first type of pop music since reggae and punk to provoke me into learning it actively as a musician; (b) that I don't have to find a guitarist, drummer and vocalist to make the music: I can do it all at home on my synthesizer and computer; (c) that rave music means a lot to my daughter and her peers and she means a lot to me; (d) that as a musicologist I find its musical structuring differs more radically from that of its precursors than most previous forms of pop. In fact, I think you almost have to go back to the change from Leroy Anderson's *Blue Tango* into Presley's version of *Hound Dog* to find such an essential musical shift in the world of Euro-American popular music. This is quite a claim, so what are the musical common

16. Conversation with Maria Tagg, 2 May 1993, referring to *No Limit* (7" mix) by 2 Unlimited on *Megadance — The Power Zone* (Virgin/EMI CDEVP 4, 1993). 'In this context the inverted snobbery of the rave scene should also be acknowledged, just as snobbish as the rock aestheticist's desire for authentic blackness (and Black Chicks' Man)... Maria may not have liked *No Limit* and bands like Prodigy get very snooty about how exclusive and non-commercial they are really. Great though this assertiveness is at first, it easily becomes the kind of tedious and anti-musical tribalism we have seen all too often before... (If I don't like it, it's Shite). Relatedly, there's a lot of individualism in the rave scene... Here the individual spotlighted is not a musician but a DJ or the club organiser'. [Comments, with which I agree, from John Lovering about the original version of this paper].

17. 'Rough', 'raw', 'anarchic', etc. are recurrent adjectives describing rock as opposed to earlier forms of popular music in much fan-oriented or journalistic literature on the subject.

18. Jackson's genuine depigmentation disorder was often reported as if he had undergone plastic surgery to make himself look whiter.

denominators of rave that make it so special?

All rave music has certain stylistic and generic common denominators. Generically, rave is intended for energetic individual dancing in discos or at rave parties. You can dance 'with' someone by just facing them but you don't touch. There should be a powerful hi-fi system, the DJ should say as little as possible and get on with the music. If indoors, there should be plenty of rhythmic laser light effects - at some raves there is even colour coding so the evening will start with a relatively mellow yellow accompanying tracks set at a leisurely 116 bpm and pass via blue and green to a frenetic red at 144 b.p.m by the end of the night.¹⁹ Asked 'what do you think the main point of a rave is?' my daughter replied:

It's Friday and you've been out socialising, chatting away with your friends. Around midnight a lot of people go to a rave just to shake their bum off. It's much less dangerous a sort of intoxication than drinking or taking dope and as long as there's either plenty of water or soft drinks there and somewhere where you can cool off now and again, you just bop till you drop.²⁰

Expounding energy all together to exciting sounds seems to be order of the day (or night).²¹ Rave compilations are qualified by terms like 'urban', 'manic', 'megadance', 'power', 'ultrasonic', 'energy', etc. Most rave runs in regular two-bar periods of 4/4 (or 4 bars of 2/4, if you prefer). These periods are about half the length of those found in an average rock number and more akin to the short modules of fast disco. Tempos generally range between 116 and 144 bpm, the most common pulse rate being around 132, i.e. much faster than a march and quicker than most disco.²² It's about the same basic pulse as up-tempo gospel in 2/4 metre, or as fast jump numbers from the forties and early fifties. This is also the same sort of speed as a bluegrass breakdown or as the polka. However, of all older forms of fast dance, it is probably most like the reel and breakdown because, like these, rave music also has a semiquaver surface rate in 2/4 (4/4). But whereas a constant banjo, fiddle or whistle run the reel's semiquavers melodically, rave puts them over percussively or as fast minimal riffs on sampled hi-hat or, less frequently, as sequenced figures assigned to some distinct sampled sound. Rock and disco's snare drum backbeats seldom occur in rave which goes too fast to let the sound's attack and decay run its full course effectively. Bass riffs, if they occur at all, are usually quite simple, and seem to consist of either repeated or single notes sounding the root position of the overlying chord (usually a triad) or circling stepwise round it. Unlike those of rock and disco, rave bass tracks are rarely prominent features of the music.

Apart from the almost continually metronomic kick-drum knocking out the crotchet pulse (a trait of much disco but not of rock and roll), rave's most

19. Thanks to Sheila Whiteley (Manchester) for this observation.

20. Maria Tagg in phone conversation, 2 May 1993.

21. Maybe sweating through the night at raves is one way of avoiding sexual showdowns of the post-AIDS era (fiddling about with condoms, discussing HIV tests, etc.). As youngsters of the rock age we never had to worry about sex as a killer. Michelle of the Merseyside Drug Training and Information Centre also remarked that whereas people used to arrive at clubs and dances in groups of young men or women and then gradually pair off and disappear as the night progressed, people arrive at rave clubs in mixed groups and only rarely leave the venue as individual couples (phone conversation, 17 May 1993).

22. The D.J. Ricci 'Rave Mix' of Ramirez's *Terapia* (DFC 124, 1993) runs at 163 bpm. This is, however, exceptionally fast, even for techno-rave tracks.

distinctive motoric feature is the almost obligatory syncopated keyboard riff, assigned to such sounds as sampled piano or 'fat' analogue synth preset.²³

Unlike rock music but like disco, rave syncopations run at a micro level, usually over half or one-bar units, rarely over two and never over more.

The instrumentation of rave is to all intents and purposes 100% synthesized and/or sampled. Most of the material is also MIDI-sequenced, this enabling the musician to set up more-or-less endless repetitions of the same figures which can then be deleted, copied, cut and pasted, transposed, quantized, offset, inverted, retrograded, delayed, inserted or otherwise adjusted on-screen to manage breaks, fills, effects and, if required, vocals. Just as stylistically essential to rave is, however, the sampler which allows the musician to insert short units of sound from other music or from sounds outside traditional musical discourses altogether into the composition. The sampler is central to rave music's originality because it allows musicians to get out of the rut of just singing and playing by providing easy access to practically manageable sonic building blocks of aesthetic and ideological potential that aren't just chords, timbres, rhythm patterns, riffs and so on. The sampler allows the composition to interact with the world outside its own discourse, not in the usual way of including lyrics to concretise some idea that is not necessarily primarily musical, but by incorporating not-necessarily musical sounds *into* the musical discourse, this broadening the concept of what music can and cannot be on a highly popular basis. Recurrent sampled effects that I have heard so far have been the spoken word, the human voice, sirens, howlers and animals (the latter including sheep, cows, elephants and, of course, the little dog in Usura's *Open Your Mind*).²⁴

It should also be borne in mind that samplers are also often used in rave, not so much for making realistic carbon copies of acoustic instruments as for recreating the obviously synthetic sounds of otherwise obsolete analog synths from the seventies and early eighties.²⁵

'Syntheticness' as reality and sounds from the world outside traditional notions of music are in other words just as characteristic of rave music's aesthetics as the metronomic onbeat kick-drum, the frenetically sequenced semiquaver surface rate, the ultra-short periodicity and the fast crotchet pulse in 4/4 (or 2/4) time.

Vocals are not an essential ingredient of rave music, but when they do occur in standard dance numbers they are of two basic types. You'll find either a female vocalist in quite a high register singing one-bar samples whose lyrics consist of short, simple repeated phrases or just single words or even just 'oo-s' and 'aa-s'; or, alternatively, you'll find a male voice, also usually sampled, reciting — not singing — single words or short phrases at regular intervals. Rave numbers featuring *sung* male vocal figures are quite rare.

As rave devotees will have gathered by now, I am restricting my account to the core of styles referred to by such labels as 'techno-rave', 'techno-house',

23. As the 'Fat Obie' (Oberheim) sample track on *Future Music CD Vol 1* (published with *FM Magazine*, UK, Spring 1993). Thanks to Gary McGuinness (Liverpool Music House studio) for loan of the record.

24. I have subsequently learnt that the dog and elephant are in fact effects obtainable using presets on an old type of Roland. Thanks to Paolo Ferrario, Bologna for this observation.

25. On the *Future Music CD Vol 1* there are several 'good old' synthesizers sampled ready for rave use (see footnote 21).

'alternative dance' or 'progressive dance' because in the rave substyles of 'dance rap' and 'hip house' (a.k.a. 'black urban'), male recitations are quite continuous and verbally coherent while the tempo is slower and the drum track less onbeat metronomic and more snare-drum / backbeat oriented — more 'funky', if you like. Similarly, the set of rave substyles labelled as 'R&B dance' — really more a sort of synthesized up-tempo soul-gospel-disco — features melodic vocals, usually sung by women, and phrases encompassing two bars rather than one.

Sung vocals are the only tracks in rave mixes that seem to be consistently given much echo, usually in the form of quite a generous reverb with Echo-plex delay effects added at suitable junctures. Other tracks seem generally to be mixed up quite loud without much reverb, this producing a close, distinct, compact and busy effect over which the women wail in what seems like another acoustic dimension.²⁶

The tonal language of rave music also shows some interesting traits. Whereas 'R&B dance' uses a lot of disco's major and minor seventh sonorities and whereas 'dance rap' sticks to the basically percussive backing tracks of rap music in general, European and North American techno-rave seems to go in a big way for the aeolian and phrygian modes, not as harmonic padding for blues pentatonicism, but as straight sets of minor mode triads or bare fifths without much trace of a seventh, let alone ninth, eleventh or thirteenth. With the exception of a few rock songs from the early eighties which sported lyrics expressing alienation, hopelessness and a sense of doom, no internationally popular music of this century has shown such a leaning toward these modes with their downward pulling minor sixths and/or seconds.²⁷

Particularly remarkable is rave music's penchant for the phrygian, a mode virtually unused previously in any form of internationally well-known music apart from what came out of Spain in the form of *malagueñas*, *farrucas*, *fandangos* and flamenco music. From a Eurocentric viewpoint, this is the mode of Spain, gypsies, Balkans, Turks and Arabs, possibly also of the *mezzogiorno*. Why phrygian? Have British rave musicians taken a stand for the new-age travellers and gypsies?²⁸

Have European and North American bedroom boffins started to support the pan-Islamic movement or is the phrygian thing a musical 'up yours' to the powers that sent the Nintendo missile through the Iraqi bomb silo window and smashed the lives of thousands of civilians in Baghdad, i.e. the same powers that condemn half the rave-going youngsters to unemployment? Or has everyone been listening to raj music? Or is the phrygian mode just new and different? If so, why that particular difference and not another? What about the lydian mode? It's just as rare in pop as the phrygian.

26. As stated earlier, wordless vocals also occur frequently. A particularly suggestive example of sampled female 'oo-ing' and 'aa-ing' can be found on Morenas' *Cuando brilla la luna*, DFC 067, 1992.

27. The signification of the aeolian pendulum in rock music has been dealt with at some length in Alf Björnberg's "There's Something Going On" — om eolisk harmonik i nutida rock-musik' in *Tvärspel - 31 artiklar om musik. Festskrift till Jan Ling*. Göteborg, Skrifter från Musikvetenskapliga institutionen, 9, 1984: 371-386. See also P Tagg "Universal" Music and the Case of Death' in *La musica come linguaggio universale* (ed. R Pozzi). Florence: Olschki, 1990: 227-266.

28. Thanks to Sheila Whiteley for the 'new age traveller' connection. At this point I played some examples of phrygian mode rave, including: BMO's *Mastermind* (see footnote 4) and Capella's *U Got 2 Know* (see footnote 3).

Rave tracks seem to have an average duration of around five minutes. In formal terms they sometimes divide into two identifiable sections containing slightly different tonal material and variations in instrumentation, at least in the sense of altered presets, muted tracks, etc. Just as often, however, techno-rave tracks are horizontally (not vertically) monothematic. Other variation comes from the way in which tracks enter and exit and sound together with (or separate from) other tracks. Rave numbers rarely start with all tracks sounding simultaneously and often build up several two-bar units of other tracks before the quantized kick drum sets in. Many rave numbers seem to feature at least one break in which the harmonic-rhythmic one or two-bar riff, often heard as sampled piano, plays solo. Sometimes breaks feature other tracks or sounds — a sampled human voice, animals, a siren, etc.

When the bass drum stops people do different things. If it's an effect or the 'tssk-tssk-tssk' noise, some people just stand still; others go round like in slow motion. If it's the piano or another 'da-daa-da-dee-da' sort of thing, a lot of people kind of wave their arms about. When the break's on, no-one moves their feet or bums much. They do that when the bass drum starts again. Breaks are dead good: quite dramatic and exciting, because everybody stops and starts again.²⁹

From this cursory glance at rave music's stylistic characteristics, several traits stand out as unique. There is a high rate of basic pulse combined with the high surface rate all sounding intentionally 'artificial' in the sense of obviously synthesized, sequenced and sampled. All this is then often tonally packaged in the aeolian or minor (gapped) pentatonic or phrygian mode with little acoustic space given to anything except the female vocalist's short, high-pitched wails.

In the study of this recent development in rock and pop music ('rock' in its widest sense) we need to ask a lot of structural and semiotic 'whys', as I did with the phrygian aspects of the music.³⁰

Why the breakneck tempo? Why the explicit metronomic pulse on kick-drum? Why the constantly dense but distinct acoustic close-up? Why no prominent bass line? Why so many effects of the film soundtrack type? Why do tracks last five minutes and not three? Why so few sung male vocals? Why so many women singing short phrases in quite a high register with so much reverb? What does this male-female division of vocal 'labour' signify in terms of gender role ideals? Or, as the title of this paper implies, why is there so little tune and so much accompaniment? I cannot answer any of these questions satisfactorily here. What I hope to do, however, is to point our thoughts as scholars of popular music in a direction that takes account of radically new musical and social conditions influencing the production and use of rave music. One way of doing this is to concentrate on the musical expression of figure and ground.

I have on several occasions tried to explain the relationship between, on the one hand, the advent of the figure / ground dualism in European visual art, with its central perspective, and, on the other hand, that of the melody / accompaniment dualism in European music. These developments in European art prefigure and/or accompany the rise of the bourgeois notion of the indi-

29. Phone conversation with Maria Tagg, 2 May 1993.

30. i.e. why has so much rave music opted for that and not for, say, quartal harmony, atonality or the lydian mode?

vidual. Put crudely, Breughel, in paintings like *Children's Games* or *The Slaughter of the Innocents*, created dozens of different human scenes as parts of one and the same picture.³¹

By the same token, William Byrd let eight non-hierarchically organised voices sing his *Great Service* as contrapuntal polyphony, not as a tune with a backing. The visual version of tune-versus-accompaniment can be seen in any Vermeer *Stilleben* — let's say the one where you see a flower in a vase at the front of the picture and a room and a window behind it (central perspective) — or in Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* — a woman's face close up front and a bit of Italian scenery behind. From the Florentine *Camerata* and onwards, we are told, monody, (i.e. a melody with an accompaniment or 'backing') became the main dynamic of European composition. To put it crudely again, Haydn and AC/DC may not have much else in common but they both made music on the basis that there has to be some sort of melodic line — be it Angus Young on guitar or a solo aria line in *The Creation* — and some sort of accompaniment of that figure — be it drums, bass and rhythm guitar or second violins, violas, cellos and chordal woodwind.

Given this historically verifiable dual relationship (a) between themes as musical figures and the foreground individual and (b) between accompaniment or backing and the environment in which the figure/ground moves and has its being, it is possible, using the basic tools of musematic analysis, to come up with quite reasonable hypotheses as to how music encodes different patterns of socialisation. In this context you need to know if the music contains any melodic figures and, if so, how many occur at the same time. You also need to identify the backcloth, if any, against which those figures are profiled. Then you have to find out how the figures interact with each other and with the background and establish any connotative meaning you might find in (a) the figure, (b) the ground and (c) in the relationship, if any, between figure and ground.

There are obvious differences between the figure/ground properties of different types of music, for example between traditional jazz, on the one hand, with its more collective forms of improvisation and shorter solo sections and, on the other hand, bebop, with its short collective sections and extensive solo improvisation. Another example would be the difference between European popular song and West African polyrhythmic music about which my mother once said 'it's nice and rhythmic, dear, but where's the tune?' Many forms of West African polyrhythmic music consist of a multitude of short, repeated, rhythmically and timbrally varied figures, all played simultaneously. Such musical structuring can also be read as social structuring: each individual part is required to differ from and yet interact with all the other individual parts. The successful musical event is in this context homologous with the successful and immediate interaction of individuals in society. The music expresses a role for individuals in a social and natural environment that differs radically from that encoded in the European melody/accompaniment paradigm. Misunderstanding these essential elements of musical structuring also belies a more general, cultural confusion about the role of the individual in different populations. For example, during a visit to Cuba in the mid seventies, some Swedish jazz musicians, accompanying the

31. Breughel also let Icharos plop virtually unseen into a corner of the Aegean sea on a painting called *The Fall of Icharos*.

Göteborg chamber choir on tour, came back to their hotel to discover a group of old men laying down really exciting rhythms on various percussion instruments in the hotel bar. The old men were delighted that guests from so far away wanted to join them in their music-making and things went fine in the collective rhythmic-motoric-harmonic jam until the Swedish saxophonist launched into an enthusiastic Cubop solo.³²

The old men all stopped playing after a few bars because their compositional norms, homologous to certain social norms governing the interaction of individuals, had been transgressed. The saxophonist's first thoughts were 'does no-one get to be free here?', those of the old men 'who does he think he is barging in like that, drowning us and bulldozing our groove out of existence?' I am not trying here to make a case for one sort of music being intrinsically more progressive and collective than another: I merely want to suggest that different ways of organising musical figures, be it as figure/ground (as in most European and North American music), as mostly ground (as in West African polyrhythm) or as mostly melody (as in much Arabic music) may correspond to different general ideals of socialisation in different cultures.

In order to make this model a bit clearer and to insert some of rave music's unique properties in their historical context, let us take a quick semiotic look at the figure/ground structuration of one of rave music's most popular precursors in the Anglo-Saxon world — heavy metal. The obvious figures of heavy metal are the lead singer and lead guitarist: they literally 'lead' and they are either the star or the (guitar) hero of the band, providing the obvious foreground identification, both visually and sonically 'up front'. Behind them, both visually and sonically, are the instruments providing the backing tracks on their recordings: drums, bass, rhythm guitar and/or keyboards. What does heavy metal backing 'say'? What does the foreground 'mean'? What does the relationship between these two express?³³

There is no room here to provide more than the most general answers to these questions. Heavy metal backing has several functions. (1) Using sonic anaphones, it stylises, humanises and culturally encodes (by sonic anaphones) certain aspects of the contemporary soundscape (broad-spectrum, consistently lo-fi noise, as in the rumble of traffic or mains hum). (2) Using transmodal anaphones, it stylises, humanises and culturally encodes a particular sense of time as experience in contemporary society.³⁴

To cut a long story short (and omitting most links in a lengthy chain of argument), heavy metal backing presents the humanised sonic image of a fascinatingly overbearing electromechanical society containing very little room for manoeuvre and subjected to almost metronomic time slavery. It's all so loud and powerful that you can only make yourself heard if you raise your

32. *Cubop*: the sort of Cuban-Caribbean inspired bebop music played by the Dizzie Gillespie big band in the late forties.

33. In what follows I am not considering the metal subgenres of thrash, speed and death which, with their lack of melody in the traditional sense of the word and as recent rock phenomena, might be worth considering from the same structural and ethnographic viewpoint as rave.

34. For explanation of anaphones, see P Tagg 'Towards a sign typology of Music' in *Secondo convegno europeo di analisi musicale* (ed Dalmonte & Baroni). Trento, 1992: 369-378. For further discussion on musical expression of time, see P Tagg 'Understanding "Time Sense"' in *Tvärspel - Festschrift till Jan Ling*. Göteborg, 1984: 21-43.

voice, like trying to talk to a friend on the other side of a city street containing a constant stream of noisy traffic. The musical equivalent of this is to scream like any self-respecting male rock vocalist over the top of all that other noise. Another strategy is to get a motor-bike that will let you weave in and out of all that traffic and take you where you want to go much faster and sooner than Smith, Jones and Robinson in their silly little cars, with the added kicks of (a) feeling the speed hit you physically and (b) making a more piercing, roaring sound than others. Of course, what with Marlon Brando, James Dean and Co., the motor-bike often turns up as social symbol of freedom and oppositionality, as, indeed, it does on lead guitar (with overdrive) in rock music.³⁵

What sort of socialisation strategy is encoded in this type of rock? It seems to me that we are hearing individuals who beat the fascinating but overbearing system by screaming louder than it, by roaring or chain-sawing their way through it. These are individuals who issue from within that system and who beat it on its own terms by being louder than the loud, sharper than the sharp, harder than the hard. Hence the heavy-metal audience's arms raised high in a collective V-sign as the singer or lead guitarist rides away into another heroic urban sunset. Unfortunately, the emancipatory potential of this monocentric socialisation strategy can degenerate into the vulgar entrepreneurial egoism of the Thatcher and Reagan era and into its musical equivalent: hyper-melodic pomp and its elevation to a hegemonic position, as in the soundtrack of *American Anthem*, as in much of Queen's music, as in *Iron Wings* and as in the Ford adverts.³⁶

Degenerated or not, monocentric types of socialisation strategy are clearly less popular with today's ravers because, as our cursory enumeration of their music's main traits reveals, they do not go much for cohesive melodic statements and seem to eschew, both musically and socially, big figures. On the other hand, rave music contains plenty of small figures constituting plenty of ground, plenty of 'environment'...

If I have not totally misinterpreted the behaviour of dancers at the few raves and rave discos I have attended and if I am allowed to regard my daughter and her peers as in any way representative informants, rave is something you immerse yourself into together with other people. There is no guitar hero or rock star or corresponding musical-structural figure to identify with, you just 'shake your bum off' from inside the music. You are just one of many other individuals who constitute the musical whole, the whole ground — musical and social — on which you stand. The music is definitely neither

35. For a more extensive account of heavy metal's figure-ground dualism, see P Tagg 'Reading Sounds' in *Recommended Records Quarterly*, 3/2. London: November Books, 1990: 4-11 [Italian translation 'Leggere i suoni' in *Quaderni di Musica Realtà*, 23, 1989: 168-183]. The clearest example of the 'motor-bike = overdriven electric guitar solo' equation is perhaps the 1988 advert for the Philishave Tracer, in which the sound effect and visual image of a 'real' motor-bike is virtually indistinguishable from the electric guitar of the music track, highly similar to the start of Dire Straits' *I Want My MTV* (on *Brothers in Arms*, Vertigo 824499-4, 1985). See also P Tagg 'Subjectivity and Soundscape, Motorbikes and Music' in *Soundscapes: essays on vroom and moo*, ed. H Järviluoma, Department of Folk Tradition, University of Tampere, 1994: 48-66.

36. See tracks sung by Mr Mister and John Parr on *American Anthem* (Atlantic 781661-1, 1986). The cover features a mini-Travolta or Ralph Macchio type in leather jacket and a blonde young woman in aerobic clothing, a pastel-pink towelling ring securing her pony-tailed hair. We were happily spared from distribution of the film in Sweden. See also footnote 9.

melody nor melody plus accompaniment. Nor is it just accompaniment any more than West African polyrhythm, William Byrd's *Great Service* or Breughel's *Slaughter of the Innocents*. Polarising the issue, you could say that perhaps techno-rave puts an end to nearly four hundred years of the great European bourgeois individual in music, starting with Peri and Monteverdi and culminating with Parker, Hendrix and, Lord preserve us, Brian May, Whitney Houston and the TV spot for Bodyform sanitary towels.³⁷

This is one important, musicologically founded reason for taking rave music seriously. Are we really witnessing a radically different musical expression of a radically new socialisation strategy amongst certain groups of young people in our society? If so, does this prefigure a new form of collective consciousness or does it mean the end of oppositionality and individualism? Or are ravers hedonistic defeatists who have abandoned all hope of being heard as individuals in this oppressive society or does their music encode a protest against a totally compromised notion of individual freedom? Perhaps ravers have so conformed and identified with this system that their music expresses no distance to or quarrel with the inexorable pulse and automated march of society? Or does rave music say 'up yours' to 'performance', 'achievement', 'competition', 'enterprise' and all those other nauseous thatcheritic buzzwords? Perhaps rave music at least criticises society by juxtaposing elements of music and sound that outside the musical event are traditionally supposed to belong to separate categories? Bearing in mind that real rave credibility consists of anonymously recording tracks on white labels, is it possible to suggest that the non-individualist character of the music actually does express a rejection of degenerate, hegemonic notions of the individual? Bearing also in mind the often semi-illegal, cooperative way in which raves are organised, is it going too far to hypothesise that rave music prefigures new forms of collective consciousness? Or are rave organisers another variation on the old 'hip capitalist' theme and rave DJs a mere variation on the old theme of central figure against general background?

The main aim of this paper has been to raise questions, not to answer them. In so doing, I have had to be quite polemical and to polarise issues quite radically. I have also had to simplify, skip major steps in lines of reasoning and leave gaping holes in both my own and in collective knowledge about techno-rave unfilled. This text may also give the impression that I consider all rave to be 'collective and good' and all rock to be 'individualistic and bad', a view to which I certainly do not subscribe. In polarising and simplifying issues, I have tried to formulate a few hypotheses (some more speculative than others) about how we, as scholars of popular music, could try to understand rave music's radical departure from the old rock canon. If we think

37. The Bodyform sanitary towel advert referred to is the one in which vast quantities of the commodity are spilled, accidentally on purpose, by one woman. One sanitary towel is then picked up by the other woman and held up against the light coming through the Venetian blinds (they are so thin!). The vocal line is an ecstatic, pompously anthemic and quite florid piece of gospel rock celebrating the commodity ('whoa!... Bodyformed for you!'). The music makes Nile Rogers's pastiche of the style — the 'Soul Glow' advert from Eddy Murphy's *Coming to America* — sound quite bland by comparison. It is difficult to imagine anything more fraught with the double standards of individuality and commerce than a sanitary towel (menstruation is supposed to be a private issue and yet a majority of the population — women — experience the phenomenon for over a thousand days of their life). In fact it may be quite logical that the perverted 'mega-individual' of rock should be used to perpetuate such double standards.

this a subject worth studying, I am sure we would be well advised to ignore the unresolved Oedipal conflicts of cultural theorists who still seem to be battling with their own emancipation from a previous, unjust authority and who cannot see their own canonisation of rock as 'absolute' fun and corporeality as equally unjust and as one of late capitalism's most efficient ideological weapons.³⁸

Nor does it help us as popular scholars, let alone my daughter and her peers, to be told by politically 'correct' metatheorists that rave is a postmodernist collage of sound with no coherent structure, narrative or direction — another insult to rave musicians and organisers who want *a* and not *b* to happen and be felt. What we *do* need in the pop academy are people prepared to do some musicological, ethnographical and sociological donkey work. In my opinion that musicological work would be well-served if carried out in the spirit of Mellers rather than according to the gospel of the most recent French fashion of 'postmodernism'.

38. Of course, the whole problem of cultural theory's idealisation, especially in 'postmodernist' terms, of rock-related genres, is a far more complicated issue than I can present here. Apart from the question of body-idealisation and its inverted racist consequences (see P. Tagg, 'Open Letter about "Black" Music' in *Popular Music*, 8/2: 285-298 [Italian translation in *Musica/Realtà*, 29: 53-80]), there also seems to be a notion that non-logocentric (including the affective, gestural and corporeal) systematisation of experience and meaning starts with Elvis Presley. This assumption falsifies European music history far more radically than the worst type of 'absolute music' aesthetics as applied to the bourgeois Central European 'classics'. Thankfully, music and dance have been around for some time on our continent making 'irrational' systematisations of individual and collective experience of body and emotions. Birgit Nielsen, fully garbed as Aida, making Ziggy Stardust look like a bank clerk and bellowing a four-minute aria as she dies, makes no 'logical' sense as narrative in a classical novel and is certainly untrue, not to say physically impossible, from a 'rationalist' viewpoint, but it makes perfect sense musically and emotionally. According to some cultural-theoretical rockologists, then, Verdi ought to be labelled 'postmodern'. Why rationalism is so irrational about the irrational strikes me, as an 'irrational' musician, as irrational. Or, as Jung quipped in one of his less metaphysical moments: 'we complacently assume that the conscious makes sense and that the unconscious is nonsense' ('Approaching the Unconscious' in *Man and his Symbols*, New York, Dell, 1968: 54). I suppose the inability to make sense of the symbolic systems relating to our collective 'irrational' will inevitably lead to recurring fads of the 'postmodernist' type in such a logocentric tradition as that of our universities.