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REVIEW ESSAY

Simon Frith. *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

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At a recent conference devoted to charting new directions in “Cultural Studies,” one of the keynote speakers confessed to me that he only attended events of this kind in order to travel to hitherto unvisited cities and explore their record stores. The conference had been fine, he acknowledged, but the international circulation of intellectuals and theoretical paradigms took place with such efficiency that there were few academic reasons to travel from one city to another. The exciting and unexpected were to be found in the delete bins of record stores, rather than in the conference presentations of intellectuals speaking about popular culture. It occurred to me that this had not always been the case, especially with regard to the academic study of popular music. In 1975 and 1985, for example, the things being thought and said about popular music in the academic world were, in a variety of ways, more interesting than the popular music being made at the time. The last two years, in contrast, have been a period of relative calm in popular music studies, coincident with the emergence of what might be considered highly interesting tendencies within the production and consumption of music itself (such as the regionalized dance music cultures of Great Britain and North America).

The texts reviewed here represent an enterprise of consolidation and summary in popular music research, with book-length collections and studies signalling the conclusion of a decade and a half of intense activity. Simon Frith and Peter Wicke have both been involved in popular music in a variety of extra-academic capacities — the former as a working critic and journalist, the latter as an influential organizer of rock music concerts in the German Democratic Republic during the 1970s. Each, as well, is now the director of a research centre devoted wholly or partially to the analysis of popular music. (Simon Frith at The John Logie Baird Centre at the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde; Peter Wicke at the Centre for Popular Music Research at the Humboldt University in Berlin.)

The principal tension running through academic and semi-academic writing on rock and related forms of popular music is not, as is commonly perceived, one between the pleasures offered by those musics and an academic discourse which feels compelled to diminish or demystify those pleasures. If, over the past two decades, the

academic study of rock music has been a problematic enterprise, this is not because an affective relationship between those writing and their objects of study has been lacking. What has been striking, on the contrary, is the committed and justificatory tone of even the most avowedly distanced of academic treatments of popular music. In that body of writings which has celebrated the liberating force of the pop music of the past decade (such as Iain Chambers's *Urban Rhythms*), this affective link has been most evident. It may be discerned as well, however, in the sense of betrayal with which many writers, in the decade which saw the winding down of punk music, have turned away from this celebratory stance towards an insistence that popular music scholars become attentive, once again, to the links between popular music and the structures of monopoly capitalism. In both cases, arguably, developments within rock music and the culture which surrounds it have been the principal forces shaping the tone and substance of popular music studies.

The intimate link between transitory musical tastes and the long-term elaboration of theoretical principals is the most welcome feature of *Music for Pleasure*, a collection of Simon Frith's critical and more academic writings. The earliest of these date from 1979, a crucial year in the unfolding of post-punk musical culture, and one in which the significant question had ceased to be that of whether punk music would be co-opted (clearly, it had arrived bearing the signs of its imminent commodification) but, rather, that of how comfortable this co-optation might be. Frith's criticism, during the half-decade following 1979, would participate in one of the curious alliances of the period: that between a quasi-academic cultural theory preoccupied with demystifying claims to authentic expression and the widespread embracing, by pop stars and their audiences, of the values of artifice and commerciality.

The novelty of Frith's criticism, to North American readers, is rooted in its consistent conviction that commercial popularity and industrial modes of production are central to the values of popular music rather than regrettable and corruptive forces acting upon them. These principles, which run through the various essays collected in *Music for Pleasure*, will normally result in the enshrining of certain historical tendencies over others: the British dance-funk music of the early 1980s over the music of Bruce Springsteen or, in a more general sense, the values of pop over those of rock. Re-reading many of these pieces outside of their original contexts, I was struck, nevertheless, by Frith's attentive vigilance towards the moment at which each successive backlash against the values of rock authenticity and "realism" has itself run aground. In a particularly cogent analysis of the pop group Scritti Politti (whose principal member, Green Gartside, transformed himself from semiotician and graduate student into teeny-bopper idol), Frith isolates the moment at which those professing to "intervene" in the site of mainstream popularity are no longer able to explain credibly the political purposes this intervention is intended to serve.

Unlike many of those whose substantive tastes he shares, Frith has never been sufficiently post-modernist to base his aesthetic preferences for certain records or performers in a celebration of consumption or superficiality as values in themselves. Rather, his ongoing preference for the pop single over the rock album may be said to grow out of an alternative populism, one in which the musical tastes of young girls, blacks, and club-going working class youths are accorded at least as much respect as those of the more obviously rebellious and serious young men whose

values have long dominated the writing of rock criticism and history. Frith is cognizant of the risks inherent in a position which so often upholds the transitory and ephemeral over the heroic and enduring, and his critical writing is marked above all else by an unrelenting ambivalence which may, on occasion, be as much a source of frustration as it is a guarantee of his own integrity as a critic.

Frith's most recent writings have been inflected by the sense of betrayal discussed earlier — by the conviction that, in a period of corporate centralization within the recording industry, an investigative journalism or an academic discourse grounded in political economy is more useful than a critical aesthetic as a tool for grasping the cultural effectiveness of popular music in Western societies. These tools are most usefully employed in the collection of original pieces which Frith edited in 1988, *Facing the Music*. The best articles here — Ken Barnes "Top 40 Radio" and Steve Perry's "Ain't No Mountain High Enough: The Politics of Crossover" — are highly demystifying, outlining the institutional procedures through which the audiences for popular musical forms come to be aligned with particular channels of dissemination in the interests of economic rationality.

The last three articles in *Facing the Music* circle around a set of themes which have become prominent in recent rock criticism and panel discussions of popular music within academic contexts: those having to do with the real or imagined "death" of rock music. Claims for the political force of rock music have moved, over the last two decades, from the proposition that the values of rock music are antagonistic to those of commodity consumption to an attempt to regard certain forms of consumption as themselves empowering and resistant. It is the latter of these positions which the articles by Simon Frith, Jon Savage, and Mary Harron seek to undermine with considerable clarity. Each, from its distinct point of departure, traces the growing complicity of popular music with the institutions and imperatives of advertising within the context of a global economy and the resurgent industries of fashion and celebrity. What is novel in these recent versions of a familiar argument is the unwillingness of Frith, Savage, and Harron to engage in the ritual call for a genuinely and resolutely oppositional rock music. On the contrary, one is left with the convincing (if somewhat melancholy) sense that too much has been made of rock music and of its capacity to embody fantasies of rebellion or articulate projects of social transformation.

The most recent collection of articles on popular music, *On Record*, was co-edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin and were obviously intended for a more exclusively academic readership. Those of us who have worked, for years, from tattered photocopies of many of these articles or have regularly sent students looking for the sociological journals of the 1950's or 1960's in which many first appeared will find *On Record* a convenience at the very least. The collection is evenly balanced between pieces now regarded as classics — David Riesman's "Listening to Popular Music," for example, or Frith and McRobbie's "Rock and Sexuality" — and a variety of writings which together map out the eclectic range of theoretical and methodological paradigms brought to bear on popular music as an object of study. I was particularly pleased to note the inclusion of pieces by Paul Hirsch and Peterson and Berger, treatments of the recording industry from the perspective of organizational sociology whose implications for recent industry-oriented research have yet to be explored fully.

When read alongside the collections discussed thus far, Peter Wicke's *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology* is most immediately striking for its coherence and consistency of purpose. I have been told by one of Dr. Wicke's students that *Rock Music* was a popular bestseller in its original German version (to the extent that people would approach its author on the street, asking for an autograph). Wicke is the best-known and most widely-respected of popular music scholars residing in Eastern Europe and has been a prominent figure in the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (of which he is currently General Secretary). While *Rock Music* is organized as a historical account beginning with the post-war emergence of rock music and concluding with the age of MTV, it is more usefully read as an intervention within ongoing debates over precisely how, one might isolate the "meaningfulness" of rock music both methodologically and theoretically.

Wicke successfully navigates his way through the twin traps which have marked the terrain of popular music studies over the past two decades. The first of these is one which reduces musical form to the expression of lived realities located elsewhere in social experience, most notably within the experiences of class, ethnicity, and geographical location. (A concern with gender has come regrettably late to the field.) The enshrining of an expressive function for rock music has long shaped the aesthetic values dominant within popular music culture, inasmuch as the purity and authenticity of this expressivity have emerged as the principal criteria through which examples of popular music are evaluated. The second trap is one wherein the experience of rock music becomes a local example of the more general phenomena of commodity consumption within capitalist societies. In the turn towards subcultural theory within popular music studies in the late 1970s, for example, there emerged claims to the effect that certain forms of consumption involved the "appropriation" of commodities for purposes often unintended by those producing or selling them.

Wicke is concerned to supersede both of these positions, avoiding the tendency of the first to separate rock music from other practices (the better to highlight its expressive relationship to those practices) and unwilling to regard the moment of consumption as the definitive one in the experience of popular music. His assertion of the inseparability of musical from other forms of experience might, in another writer's words, seem platitudinous, but Wicke's arguments for this inseparability are highly suggestive:

Every dancer knows what intensity of feeling can be produced by a repeated pattern of steps and it was as dance music that "Love Me Do" originated. In other words, instead of transposing emotions into musical structures according to a handed down aesthetic code, these emotions were presented in movement, a movement which demanded the active participation of the listener so that the emotions could be created in reality. (p. 53)

Rock developed not through an arbitrary linear progression of styles, but organically through its respective cultural contexts of use, embedded in the concrete structures of everyday life and specific social experiences and forming a multi-layered totality composed of parallel streams and separate "scenes" diverging more and more widely. (p. 74)

The phenomenological aptness of these passages comes at the expense of what one

might call their methodological portability: they convincingly evoke the complexities of musical experience without providing a set of analytic tools which one might with confidence adapt to one's own uses. This is, I would argue, a symptom of the richness of Wicke's arguments rather than of his failure to attain a stated objective. The call for a study of "the social and cultural interactions [which] arise around music," with which Wicke concludes his book, seems to me as fruitful an agenda for future work in the field as any other which I have encountered recently. My initial reading of *Rock Music* was inflected by the claim, on the part of a number of people familiar with his work, that he was among those popular music scholars anxious to bring about a return to the "music itself" as an object of study. Inasmuch as those examples of this "return" which I have encountered to date fail to avoid the trap of structural homologies — positing musical structures as reflective of larger social structures — Wicke's attention to the *embeddedness* of musical experience (and to the overdetermination of that experience by a complex of social and cultural factors) was welcome.

Three days after the opening of the Berlin Wall, one of Dr. Wicke's students took me to a punk concert at the Gethsemane Church in East Berlin, a central meeting place for the opposition movements which had emerged throughout the autumn of 1989. Over the course of the last decade, my taste for live punk music has given way to a clear and dogmatic preference for dance clubs and disc jockeys, and I had spent the night following the collapse of the wall going from discotheque to discotheque in East Berlin hearing the same five or six dance records which were playing in Ottawa clubs the night before I left. At the Gethsemane Church, for the first time in a decade, I was compelled to renew my faith in the expressive and affective force of raw, live rock music. The conclusion to be drawn from this — about the determining effect of historical and social context upon musical meaning — is banal and uncontroversial, but the desire to use that conclusion as a point of departure will continue to drive popular music studies down a number of interesting roads.

Will Straw