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Popular Music in *Punch*: Antagonism towards Modern Mass Culture

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Various source media, *Punch* Historical Archive 1841-1992



Search Methodology

When exploring representations of "popular music" in *Punch*, the first thing to note is that this key term is relatively modern, with the vast majority of word searches resulting in mentions or articles dating from the mid-1950s onwards. This is not to say that other keyword searches, such as "jazz" or "Gilbert & Sullivan" will not furnish the researcher with valuable material, but rather that etymologies change over the course of the magazine's long print run. In addition, entering a term such as "The Beatles" will provide a wealth of entries, although often these will consist of mere passing mentions. Once the entries relating to popular music have been accessed, it is then possible to gain valuable insights into the linguistic registers used to discuss popular music, and to analyse the terms used to discuss issues about class, nationality and aesthetics as well as popular music's relationship to technology. In addition, certain names start cropping up on a regular basis, allowing the researcher to then use these contributors as keyword searches; for instance, Miles Kington or Richard Cook.

Punch's Initial Resistance to Pop Music

Punch never ignored new developments in popular culture. In fact, the latest new fad, whether in fashion or the arts, was often eagerly seized upon. In 1919, jazz - the "pop music" of its day - was mentioned in 58 articles, although usually merely in passing. Charivaria's connection of a "serious outbreak of Jazz music" with the influenza epidemic (15 January 1919: 33) is typical of its dismissive attitude. Similar attitudes re-emerge later with rock n' roll in the mid-1950s and subsequently with the rise of The Beatles and increasingly globalised pop from 1963. However, it

would be wrong to make any blanket generalisations regarding the magazine's dealings with the form. While Basil Boothroyd and Alex Atkinson's "Manual for Pop-Mongers" (30 October 1957: 506) is nothing more than a sarcastic "how to" guide for writing and performing pop, replete with barely-disguised class and race-based prejudice, Richard Findlater's "Star-Spangled Show Business" (20 September 1961: 412) is an astute overview of the burgeoning home-grown entertainment scene; whether dealing with Kitchen Sink drama, "realist" cinema or such pop stars as Adam Faith or Anthony Newley singing in a clearly British idiomatic style. Findlater manages to escape the jingoism so often associated with boosting British popular culture at the expense of American models. He does this without being explicitly anti-American, unlike many other *Punch* columnists of this period.

Developments in Critical Style and Register

It is, however, accurate to characterise the bulk of the articles dealing with popular music in the remainder of the decade as dismissive, uncomprehending and sometimes downright cruel. Influential contributors such as Benny Green and Anthony Burgess were already middle-aged in this period and both their values and mode of writing are redolent of those brought up between the wars. In addition, as "jazzers" they exhibit the almost obligatory disdain towards popular music that their background demanded. In "The Antis" (20 September 1967: 430) Burgess bemoans jazz's popular demise at the expense of its crude, amplified descendant, yet reserves most of his bile for members of the intelligentsia who have been seduced by pop and dare to take it seriously. He refers to such critics as "electronic lice". Many other similar

diatribes could be cited from this period. In the 1970s the critical climate begins to change, but Green's review columns continue to promulgate high-culture distinctions. In "Take it Away, Iago" (21 November 1973: 809) he scathingly dismisses the musical "Catch My Soul" for daring to try and update the Bard for a new audience. He then proceeds to discount all "clumsy plastic pseudo-musicals" before condemning the whole field of popular music. In Orwellian terms, this whole period could be summed up in the distinction "Jazz Music Good - Pop Music Bad".

A More Sympathetic Approach

From the 1970s *Punch* begins to employ those who understand and appreciate popular music - the likes of Chris Welch (editor of *Melody Maker*), John Peel (columnist for *Disc* and a BBC DJ) and Simon Frith, from the young academic discipline of Sociology. This does not signal a complete break with Mr *Punch*'s sharp tongue; all these writers recognise the pitfalls and idiocies of the industry and of some of its products and are prepared to hit their critical targets hard. In "Palmerama" (Simon Frith; 19 January 1977: 116) Frith is scathing in his criticism of Tony Palmer's book and television series "All You Need is Love", seeing his overview of pop as partial and inaccurate. More importantly however, this new cadre of writers is prepared to view popular music as both entertainment and as a significant form of cultural expression, with the one not precluding the possibility of the other. In the case of Peel's "This Record Year" (19 May 1976: 882) the writer astutely identifies the coming demise of the rock old guard and the advent of the punk explosion several months before it occurs; and several months is a long time in pop. It is unfortunate that such writers

only wrote sporadically for *Punch*, with most of their best work and influence to be found in other publications.

"House writers" such as Miles Kington emerge at approximately the same time. These writers were young enough to write in a register more fitting to both the age and the subject, yet possessed the knowledge to historicise the form. Kington showed in "All You Need is a Good Memory" (6 April 1977: 604) that pop was developing and changing, but that many forms of change were cyclical, rather than revolutionary. This is not to say that *Punch* and its writers completely leave behind the old uncomprehending ways. For some bizarre reason, comedy writer Barry Took is delegated to write a review of several "youth interest" films in 1979, ("Bowie Knifed", 21 March 1979: 323) including 'Just a Gigolo', starring David Bowie. Took's lack of critical expertise is perhaps most clearly exposed when he states ... "David Bowie (who I have not seen before and know of only by repute)". Whilst it is true that Bowie's film career was a side line to his pop fame, he had already garnered critical praise in the film 'The Man Who Fell to Earth' and had been one of the most successful and critically acclaimed popular musicians since 1972. For Took never to have seen or heard Bowie by this period speaks volumes for the continuing disparities in "taste cultures" that *Punch* was slow to efface.

The Final Years: Too Little Too Late

In the last few years before the magazine's demise, *Punch* belatedly employs a regular staff writer with an expertise in pop in the figure of Richard Cook. Cook contributes many reviews and articles in the period 1988- 92 and condemns the old bourgeois

cynicism of past writers to the pages of history. Intriguingly, *Punch* seems to begin the process of self-parody in its twilight years, with the gossip column *Guttersnipe*, often written by Miles Symons. This often consists of a satirical deconstruction of how *Punch* would once have dealt with pop and popular culture, whilst at the same time still deflating the pomposities always present within the world of contemporary music. In this ironic mode, *Punch* entered into the postmodern world of double coding - critiquing its own past house style as well as its chosen subject.

Fittingly, shortly before *Punch* ceased publication, an anonymous writer sarcastically reveals a fabrication of *The Oldie* magazine's "anti-pop prospectus" 02 October 1991: 7. In some senses, *The Oldie*, in the guise of writers such as Richard Ingrams, was to go on to assume the mantle of curmudgeonly criticism formerly associated with *Punch*, and continues, along with the likes of *Private Eye*, to do so. The baton had been passed.

Summary

Punch magazine's relationship to popular music and more broadly, popular culture was essentially ambivalent. Whilst the publication was built upon radical satire and a fair measure of anti-establishment iconoclasm, research reveals a frequently deep-seated antagonism towards mass culture (cinema and television, as well as popular music). In addition, the implied racism and class discrimination that is threaded through many articles on the subject must also be acknowledged. This is particularly true until

well into the 1960s, when newer writers with more knowledge of popular forms emerged. As with all publications, *Punch* had to reflect the views of its readership, which was essentially middle class, bourgeois and in cultural terms, reactionary. However, beginning in the 1960s, *Punch* did change both its critical register and its aesthetics regarding popular music and mass culture, but it changed belatedly, rendering many of its columnists and their views hopelessly outdated in the new zeitgeist. In *Punch* "wit" often stood for sourness and dogmatism whereas the British "satire boom" of the 1960s had more mischief and levity - witnessed as much in Monty Python as in Peter Cook or David Frost. The so-called Underground Press (*OZ*, *IT* etc.) could also be satirical and scurrilous, but in a more scatological and less pompous manner than *Punch*. Paradoxically, in its last few years of declining readership, *Punch*'s coverage of popular music was at its best, its tone was still irreverent, yet essentially respectful of its topic, with journalism often the equal of that found in more specialist publications.

The Value as a Teaching Resource

Students unfamiliar with either *Punch* or journalistic representations of this particular area of popular culture will find that the archive provides a very user-friendly and efficient way to engage in sophisticated social and historical research. *Punch*'s relationship to popular music can be explored as a symbolic representation of wider cultural and aesthetic shifts. Close readings of individual articles or the collected works of certain writers will allow for broad conclusions relating to notions of "Britishness", class, register and social values to be drawn as they shift - usually belatedly - over the course of a long period. In

particular, the magazine's struggle to maintain, or possibly move on from its radical, anti-establishment beginnings can be seen to be in conflict with an essentially elitist view of the function of art and entertainment. This allows us to explore processes of interpellation linking its editorial stance to the values of its readership. In a concrete sense *Punch* is an exemplar of the high art/low culture critical distinctions that have been such a salient feature of British society over the past several decades. It is thus a historical barometer of wide cultural forces, assumptions and mythologies that may be seen to still hold sway, at least to a certain extent, in the contemporary critical climate.

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