

Editorial introduction

Students of popular music need little reminding of the importance of history: as numerous contributions to this journal testify, acute awareness of historical origins, lineage and context is clearly deemed obligatory by most practitioners in the field. However, there has generally been a certain reluctance to dwell in or on the past for any length of time. Obviously, this is often perfectly justifiable as many musicological projects require historical matter to serve only as the foundation and not the final edifice. It is disappointing, though, that even historians have devoted little time to exploring an area that could provide so much.

The intention behind this issue of *Popular Music* was to provide a stimulus for such exploration. Rather than call forth a general 'history' edition, which might result in a decidedly inchoate end-product, the decision was taken to organise the volume around issues of 'core and periphery' in British and British-influenced popular music from 1750. Apart from providing a degree of focus and coherence, such a choice was particularly, although not exclusively, intended to allow for the consideration of the issues of national, ethnic, regional and local identity that have become so central to the historical agenda in the last decade. Social history as it has emerged since the 1960s has considered an ever-growing range of subject matter but, especially in the British context, it has been dominated by issues relating to class and, belatedly, gender. Only in the last decade have identities rooted in what might loosely be termed territorial allegiance gained any significant space in the research agenda, a result of both the intensification of political debates over devolution and independence and the growing influence of academic discourses stressing the multi-dimensional nature of consciousness and identity. That historians of popular music should consider such issues seems especially important, for music, perhaps more than any other form of cultural practice with the possible exception of sport, is particularly well-endowed with the necessary emotional power to allow for the effective articulation and construction of identities of place. All this is, of course, in no sense intended to downplay the role of class (or gender) in modern British history. As a number of the contributors show, the real challenge for the future is to chart the interplay between different types of social identity and their deployment in struggles over social, cultural and political power.

It has eventually proved possible to collect here a set of articles dealing with the relationship between a number of different centres and margins within Britain and its Empire (and occasionally other European empires) between 1850 and 1980. Although the contributors have approached the core/periphery issue through different areas of musical life and from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, there are interesting parallels in their work. All stress the complex processes involved in the production and consumption of musical culture: resistance, negotiation and appropriation are invariably present to some extent. Similarly, the contributors, some more explicitly than others, are concerned to emphasise the multi-vocal nature of language (in this instance both musical and verbal), to stress the variety of meanings that can attach to a particular song or complete genre, according to the context in which it is performed. Perhaps we can see here

evidence of the way in which those engaged in historical writing are coming to terms with the challenge offered by the 'linguistic turn' within social history over the last decade by marrying the most fertile theories of the 1970s with an acknowledgement of the new currents of the 1980s and 1990s.¹ The debt to Gramsci is clear in the acceptance of the possibility for resistance and, while post-structuralism as practised by its leading British exponents is seen by many to lead too easily to a type of linguistic determinism, its acknowledgement of the polysemic nature of texts has been absorbed more thoroughly than even some overtly 'empirical' practitioners believe (Steinberg 1996). Not for the first time, social historians seem to be dealing with a supposed paradigm shift by naturalising it.

The call for papers for this issue demonstrated that the historian's long neglect of popular music may well be coming to an end. Alongside those who were able to contribute, significant pockets of work in progress came to light. It is especially gratifying that, at least in the field of British history, historians already blessed with substantial reputations in other areas, are now turning their attention to the subject. Jeffrey Richards, for example, a major figure in opening up the history of British popular culture, is engaged in a study of music and imperialism, while John Lowerson and Gareth Williams, interestingly both highly regarded sports historians, are at work on the history of amateur operatics and 'voluntary' musical societies in Wales respectively. Hopefully, others will follow: rich rewards await. They await, too, of course, in fields other than British history. The British-centred nature of this edition is once again the product of a search for coherence and not of any narrowness of imagination or spirit. If these contributions encourage scholars working on other countries and cultures to offer work on issues related to core and periphery (or indeed, any other areas of historical investigation) it will have served a most useful purpose.

Endnote

1. The best route into the most recent discussions over social history's epistemology is to follow the debate in the journal *Social History* which began with the editorial in May 1992 and continues unabated.

References

- Steinberg, M. 1996. 'Post-structuralism and the Thompsonian perspective', *Social History*, 21/2.