

Jan Fairley

In the earliest days of IASPM the pressing question was ‘what is popular music?’. As the association became more academic the question changed to ‘what is popular music studies?’. The question should have been ‘what is a popular music scholar?’. And the answer would have been Jan Fairley.

Jan was born in 1949 in Birkenhead and grew up in Ellesmere Port, although her grandfather’s family had come from Edinburgh, where they were well known in the dance world. The Fairleys ran a down-market ballroom and snooker parlour in Leith, and regularly won local dance competitions. Jan studied Comparative Literature at the University of Essex and, in 1971, took a teaching job in Chile. She was there during the days of the military coup that deposed Allende, and music and politics would ever more be entwined in her life. Her friendships with radical songwriters and performers put her own life in danger; she had to escape the country via the British Embassy.

Back in Britain Jan completed an MPhil in Latin American Studies at Oxford University with Robert Pring-Mill and then a PhD in Ethnomusicology at the University of Edinburgh, where she lived for the rest of her life. Her thesis was on the Chilean exile group, Karaxú!; her degree was awarded by the Department of Scottish Studies.

Jan had an unusual relationship with the academy. She never had a permanent university post, although she had a long association with the Institute of Popular Music Studies at Liverpool University as a research fellow. She was, nonetheless, a leading light in the most important scholarly institutions in popular music studies: she was one of the most active members of IASPM, of which she became chair; she was the longest serving editor of *Popular Music*. In both roles Jan was instrumental in ensuring that academic popular music studies was kept open to scholarly voices from outside the Anglophone academy and to scholarly work on music that resisted the Anglophone popular music hegemony. Almost single-handedly, it sometimes seemed, Jan kept issues of language and difference on the agenda.

To make a living Jan worked as a journalist. She wrote features and reviews for the *Scotsman* and the *Guardian*; she contributed to the various music outputs of the *Rough Guide* franchise; she was a familiar figure in *fRoots* and *Songlines*. Jan was responsible for the track selection and sleeve notes on numerous world music anthologies; her last compilation, *Beginners Guide to Flamenco*, was issued on the Nascente label earlier this year. From 1990 to 1994 Jan had a weekly world music show, *Earthbeat*, on Radio Scotland; under her direction from 1995 to 1997 music and politics became a central feature of the Edinburgh Book Festival. For those of us immured in the UK university system, it has always seemed ironic that Jan, who was judged not to have the requisite research profile for a full-time academic post and struggled to get any funding support for her work, had a far bigger ‘impact’

on the public understanding and appreciation of the possibilities of popular music than anyone on a university payroll.

In her own scholarly work Jan was always aligned to popular music studies rather than to ethnomusicology, a spurious distinction conceptually but a significant one institutionally, in terms of colleagues, conferences, shared questions and approaches.

Jan was interested from the very beginning of her music-writing career in the conjunction of western and non-western musical practices and in the ways in which material circumstances affect aesthetic decisions, whether in her studies of Chilean music making, her analyses of performing conventions, her work on Cuban music history or her exploration of the lives of women artists. Jan's academic research reflected her journalistic activity. It was rooted in conversations with musicians; it meant understanding the world in which they had to make a living. Jan liked musicians and her enthusiasm was infectious. But she also had an understanding of the irritations and rivalries of a musical life and she made an important scholarly contribution to the analysis of the promotional networks that shape world music. She was equally interested in musicological questions, in how sounds and gestures can be investigated as complex, idiosyncratic articulations of socio-historical cultural forces.

Jan's academic work was organised, I think, around her belief that not only must music be understood as a way of life, but that life only made sense as a continuous musical event. As anyone who ever spent time with her will know, where there was Jan there was music – when she was at home, when she was at work, when she travelled, when she spoke. And, uniquely, Jan lacked any kind of musical snobbery. In one of the many tributes on the web following her death, the journalist Nigel Williamson comments ruefully that he was often infuriated by Jan's unwillingness, as a reviewer, to say anything negative about anyone. But this was not because she had no critical values (far from it: Jan held people to the highest moral standards); rather, it was because for Jan music making was not the sort of thing one judged, detachedly. It was something people did because they were people, just as they talked, laughed, cooked, made love.

In recent years Jan was most animated – and most entertaining – when talking about the pleasure she took in singing with the Forth Valley Chorus, an all-woman barbershop group good enough to be regular winners of UK championships and to compete internationally. She was interested in the Chorus's performing conventions, of course (she had to use very un-Jan-like make-up, for example), and in the differences between her experiences in the Chorus and in her other regular choral group, the choir at Christ Church, Morningside. More than anything else she loved *sharing* music with so many disparate people.

Jan Fairley was a model of what a popular music scholar should be in her refusal to accept the usual distinctions. She did not distinguish between her journalism and her academic work; she did not differentiate between ethnomusicology and popular music studies; she understood the equal social importance of amateur and professional musicians; she did not believe that some sorts of popular music were better than others. That said, she also had an unwavering belief that music and music making mattered and mattered in ways that were essentially political: music is essential to the good life and it is our duty as scholars to promote the good life. There was a kind of zeal to Jan's engagement with popular music studies, a daunting passion for whatever sounds she had most recently discovered and an obstinate commitment to

democracy in everyday practice that made her an infuriating as well as an inspiring colleague. As I am sure many *Popular Music* readers would agree, IASPM conferences would have been much less interesting, argumentative, exhausting and fun without Jan. She will be much missed.

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