

PMRU 'Shifting Ground': A Study Day in Popular Music and Publishing

29th January, 2010

Recap and Review

This was a varied study day, comprising formal academic papers alongside more informal debates and question and answer sessions. The day brought together academics from a range of fields with industry professionals to discuss a variety of aspects of publishing in relation to popular music.

The day started as it meant to go on, with a paper session featuring talks from speakers representing a range of fields: Marissa Joseph, a publisher, Dai Griffiths, a musicologist, and Mark Duffett, a lecturer in media and cultural studies. The session covered a diverse range of topics from the adaptation of novels into musicals, through the development of lyric sites and the nature of lyric transcriptions, to the publication of self-help/philosophy books as an example of the extension of the brand of rap stars. Each paper focussed on case studies to explore links between the publishing industry(s) and music. Despite the seemingly disparate subject areas, themes began to emerge, such as the use of printed material by the music industry both to boost sales of music, and to generate extra income. It was also clear from Marissa and Mark's papers that music can be a significant boon to the book publishing industry, as links to music artists and musicals can be used to boost sales and reach new audiences. Dai's paper reminded us of the tendency of fans to separate aspects of music out for discussion and publication in its own right.

The middle of the day was devoted to an industry panel, led by Lisa Busby. The panel consisted of: Dave Newton, founder of Shifty Disco Records, and director of an online music shop 'Oxford Music Net' and an e-ticketing site 'We Got Tickets'; Bruce McClure, co-founder and director of Seed Records; and Laurence Colbert, a well established professional recording artists and session drummer, who is also currently studying in the Brookes music department. Chaired by Lisa, the panel and audience had a lively discussion covering a variety of topics, ranging from the impact of the internet on record shops, through the effect of digital formats on sound quality of recordings, the desirability (or not) of the physical objects related to music (record packaging was discussed here, as well as differing formats and hi-fi systems), and the ways that the internet could be used to reach new audiences. Again, themes emerged here which were repeated throughout the day. The importance of linking music to a unique physical object as an effective sales technique for independent artists and labels, and conversely the reduced need for the physical 'sales spaces' and equipment previously related to music in order to record and distribute music in the digital environment was discussed as a potential fundamental turning point for the music industry and music-making.

The afternoon session focussed particularly on the music press, and again combined academic and industry perspectives, opening with two music academics and closing with a journalist's view. Jan Butler provided a historical perspective, exploring the initial rise of the rock critic in the mid 1960s and the impact that this had on the definition and development of rock in America. Jenny Skellington focussed on the so-called end of the 'Golden Age' of pop and rock music and writing. By exploring the impact of the rise of broadsheet coverage of popular music over the course of the 1980s in Britain she argued that the ability of the critic to be critical was compromised and replaced with a style of coverage presenting music as entertainment. The afternoon ended with a question and answer session with the keynote speaker, Barney Hoskyns - music journalist, author, and co-founder and editorial director of the online music journalism library, 'Rock's Backpages'. The session initially focussed on the current state and status of journalism, and its relationship[to traditional music publications and the internet. The nature of Rock's Backpages as an archive largely collecting older journalism and converting it into digital format seemed to suggest that an era of music journalism in the form of critical opinions by tastemakers in print was coming to an end, to be replaced on the one hand by print magazines written in a bland house style and on the other by unedited online blogs and journals that could return to a more critical style of freelance journalism, but would lack the authority of being presented in a well-known, respected

publication. Again, the discussion became increasingly animated as the audience became involved, covering a range of issues before focussing once more on the impact of the internet. The exciting potential for democratisation of views and access to music and the means of making music was praised, but acknowledged also was the loss of publications carrying recognised tastemakers and opinion formers who could help interested music lovers navigate through the vast quantities of material on the web.

Dai Griffiths then brought the day to a close by discussing themes that had emerged and suggesting ways to move forward with the links made between the publishing department, local industry figures, journalists and other academics on the day. There was agreement that the cross-disciplinary dialogue had been fruitful, touching on exciting areas for further research and collaborative work and, perhaps most importantly, there was a general consensus that the day had been thought-provoking and enjoyable for all involved, and well worth developing further.