REVIEW | Popular Music and Retro Culture in the Digital Era

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One of the most often quoted lines from Simon Reynold's *Retromania* is "…there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of *its own immediate past*" (Reynolds 2011: xiii, Italics in original). Indeed, our appetite for the past appears insatiable and permeates many aspects of our lives including fashion, furniture, transport, and leisure. The past, it seems, is a resource to be liberally borrowed from, and nowhere is this more apparent than in popular music, where many contemporary sounds are imbued with the essence of previous decades. A growth in popular music heritage activity has accompanied these sonic works. Any pub, club, or private dwelling associated with a pop luminary appears ripe for inclusion within a walking tour or interactive map aimed at establishing the pop credentials of a previously overlooked town or city. These physical manifestations are accompanied by online equivalents, led by individuals, communities, or international corporations that facilitate access to the lesser-known artists of yesteryear, as well as global superstars. While such activities can be viewed in a positive light, as celebrations of cultural heritage, or as a boost to

economic activity for example, they have also attracted criticism. This has often focused on critiquing our apparent obsession with the past that acts to stifle creativity and curtail pop's progressive trajectory (Reynolds 2011; Fisher 2014). Running parallel is the apparent foregrounding of the "golden" or "classic" age of rock and the performers associated with it. Andy Bennett (2009) posits that a process of "retrospective cultural consecration" exists, which confers critical acclaim, historical importance and cultural value on particular texts, which includes the assembly of a canon of rock artists in the print and visual media (see Bennett 2009: 478, for a list of films and TV programmes that contribute to the building of this canon).

Given the above, it is apposite that this publication opens with the late Mark Fisher's lament that we are currently trapped in the twentieth century (Fisher 2014). Hogarty is quick to acknowledge the positions taken by both Fisher and Reynolds, and introduces her book as "the first concerted theoretical and empirical academic study on the topic [that] examines the issues of retro and nostalgia culture from the point of view of popular music fans and focuses exclusively on popular music rather than popular culture" (1).

Hogarty approaches the task via clearly delineated chapters that situate the work, the theoretical framework employed, the qualitative work with participants, results, and conclusions. Her contention is that we currently inhabit an age of retro culture "that is occupied by the ghosts of popular music's past" (2). She posits that this renders previous theories for understanding popular music, including subcultural and postsubcultural approaches, redundant as "popular music is simply not solely about youth anymore" (3), a sentiment echoed in the growing literature on ageing music fans (for example Bennett 2013 and Kotarba 2013). Borrowing from David Hesmondhalgh (2005), Hogarty argues that it is necessary to address the intergenerational composition of pop's current audience and proposes adoption of Mannheim's concept of the "generation unit" (a subset within a generation that shares tastes, attitudes and dispositions based on their common sociohistorical location) as a point to begin this exercise. This is necessary, she continues, as such a unit with borrowed nostalgia for unlived eras has helped to facilitate the rise of retro culture (3).

Using ideas developed by Jacques Derrida (1994) and Raymond Williams (1961), Hogarty conceptualizes retro culture as a hauntological structure of feeling, which is characterized by a belief that music of the past "is more authentic and futuristic than the music of the present" (3). She also argues that technological innovations are key in sustaining "immersion in a musical past" (103) as they enable the generation unit that identifies with music from the past to access the artists from preceding eras on a scale unavailable to previous generations of music fans via immaterial technologies, as well as "searching for a 'real' musical past through archaic material traces…" (103-4).

Hogarty's empirical data are drawn from a cross-generational sample of forty music fans recruited from "a third-level educational institution in the greater Dublin area in Ireland" (53), and it is the interviews undertaken with younger music fans that demand the most attention. These participants were, for example, unable to identify new genres or new subcultural trends and, for some, popular music fandom was experienced as an individual, rather than group activity. Some also considered music not as a youthful cultural form around which they bonded with their peers, but rather as an activity to share with their elders (61-2). Interestingly, Hogarty reports that some younger members reported feeling like "frauds" and "memory tourists," believing they did not have the right to remember the older music they enjoy. To authenticate their fandom, these fans attended re-union gigs and purchased older music formats such as vinyl records.

For Hogarty, these responses revealed "their sense of being haunted by popular music(s) past" (84), demonstrating a hauntological structure of feeling in the desire to resurrect a time in which music really mattered along with a belief that "contemporary music lacks originality and its own unique zeitgeist...[with] no musical sense of 'Now'" (80). We can speculate that this is exacerbated by the visibility of celebrations of the "golden age" of pop through media representations and heritage activities that imply the best popular music has already been produced and enjoyed by previous generations. This links with an ideology of rock music in particular that emphasizes the agency of both artist and audience, and the notion that rock spoke on behalf of its predominantly youthful followers. This is particularly evident in the counterculture movement of the late 1960s (see Gebhardt 2015: 49-59). The pervasive nature of these representations along with the current cross-generational appeal of rock might be factors that lead younger participants to question how current music scenes and times are likely to be remembered, and what will define their generation's culture.

Additionally, for some of Hogarty's younger participants, engagement with music from the past is viewed as resistant consumption, a rejection of what they see as cynical capitalism aimed at their generation. In attempting to flesh out these attitudes, Hogarty notes "[t]he attitude of this generation unit is that they desire contemporary music that is genuinely new in their view, or older music that was new and original in its time. What they tend to vehemently oppose is new music that replicates what has gone before" (88). Hogarty concludes that retro culture comprises "cultural and technological factors" with young fans viewing their engagement with music from the past as a way of "restoring the authenticity and sense of futurism" they feel is not available to them. "Thus, in seeking to remember the twentieth century, these fans are actually seeking to remember the future" (136-7).

The book's strength lies in the qualitative data from the sample, which, certainly in respect of the younger respondents, provides an insight into the apparent rejection of contemporary popular music and, indeed, the times in which we live.

It would have been interesting, and of value, if the work had included some comparison with other younger music fans that were, perhaps, less invested in their engagement with older music. Another interesting question is what constitutes contemporary popular music? This is not fully explored and might have added a further dimension: is there, for example, no contemporary music that appeals? Parker and Croggon (2014: web source) contend, for example, that the notion of retromania and the listing of historical reference points "blinds us to what is most interesting about contemporary music".

The admission from some respondents that they do engage with contemporary formats and music, despite their preference for the vintage, suggests that their tastes and listening practices might be more nuanced than reported. While the presence of a hauntological structure of feeling is well argued, I wonder about the pervasiveness of this: could engagement with older popular music be, for example, a device used to signal individuality in an age lacking the subcultures that characterized previous decades? Additionally, the possibility that hauntology as an idea is open to interpretation is not fully addressed. Sprod (2012: web source) notes, for example, that viewing hauntology as "nostalgia for the lost future" ignores the notion that the future exists "as always-already lost".

Despite these caveats, this publication is a thought-provoking work that suggests new ways to interpret current engagement with popular music from the past, particularly among the younger generation. The text guides the reader through the investigation, clearly making the links between theoretical and empirical work. There is something here for both the casual or serious popular music scholar seeking to understand why pop's past continues to exert influence on contemporary music. The book succeeds in opening the conversation to new voices, away from the often-nostalgic reflections of those who experienced the 'golden age' as young fans and confirms (if confirmation were required) that the past, present, and future of popular music are, and will continue to be, fascinating areas for debate and study.

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