



# What questions should historians be asking about UK popular music in the 1970s?

John Mullen

## ► To cite this version:

John Mullen. What questions should historians be asking about UK popular music in the 1970s?. Bernard Cros; Cornelius Crowley; Thierry Labica. Community in the UK 1970-79, Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2017, 978-2-84016-287-2. hal-01817312

**HAL Id: hal-01817312**

**<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-01817312>**

Submitted on 17 Jun 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

***What questions should historians be asking about UK popular music in the 1970s?***

***John Mullen, Université de Rouen Normandie, Equipe ERIAC***

One of the most important jobs of the historian is to find useful and interesting questions about the past, and the debate about the 1970s has partly been a question of deciding which questions are important. The questions, of course, are not neutral, which is why those numerous commentators for whom the key question is “Did the British people become ungovernable in the 1970s?” might do well to balance this interrogation with other equally non-neutral questions, such as, perhaps, “Did the British elites become unbearable in the 1970s?”

My reflection shows, it is true, a preoccupation with “history from below”, but this is the approach most suited to the study of popular music history. So, turning to this topic, what interesting questions can be asked and answered about 1970s popular music? In informal discussion among enthusiasts, one might often come across questions of the following nature:

Who were the best groups?

Which were the unmissable concerts?

Were the 1970s artistes so much more creative than today?

What popular music was an authentic voice of the people?

And what popular music was purely commercial?

These questions are generally too subjective or trivial to help us understand historical process. Serious rock magazines and critics often deal with another series of questions such as the following:

Which artistes influenced which other artistes?

Which musical genres influenced which other genres?

What can we know about the “pre-history” of new genres?

How did the tradition of drumming or of rock guitar develop ?

These questions represent a “history of art” point of view. Their strength is that they can allow us to construct the popular music of the 1970s as a process of traditions, borrowings, collages and innovations. Many of the answers to such questions would enable us to trace histories of technological innovation, performance aesthetics, instrumentology, lyrical subject matter, use of voice and so on. The weakness of the questions, from the point of view of the historian, is that they examine the content of popular music separately from the rest of the history of society, and so ignore the links between people’s music and their social and cultural lives. I will, then, be proposing other priorities.

### **How can we study popular music?**

Studying popular music is not an easy task. Britain in the 1970s produced tens of thousands of songs and concerts; there were hundreds of groups who were important to millions of people. Further, the current genres of popular music were typically in a state of rapid flux. People who are well-informed about heavy metal can easily explain the

differences between the repertoires and processes of 1972 and those of 1974. Anybody who knows punk rock well is aware that 1979 was quite different to 1977. The different subcultures (reggae, punk, metal or two-tone) were as Roger Sabin pointed out, constantly mutating,<sup>1</sup> and their study is further complicated by the many different levels of engagement which were available to individuals. The result is that popular music history can be difficult to pin down.

### **Why study popular music?**

If we persist, it is for a reason. Fundamentally, it is because popular music is something which was and is tremendously important to millions of people. Popular music does not serve to **illustrate** history with a capital H, which happens elsewhere in panelled cabinet rooms and conference halls in windy seaside resorts, it is itself part of history. Popular music is something which allowed the expression both of generational and class rebellion and of teenage consumerism. It allowed the exploration of virtuosity, of ideas, of feelings and of fantasies. It was (and is) lived as something which “belonged to the people” and particularly to young people, culture for once which was not sanctioned by exams, which was not approved of by the school system (even better, it was often actively disapproved of). Further, popular music is a series of activities which allows immersive involvement: dancing, singing along, and dressing to genre, for example. In the forms which were dominant in the 1970s – essentially rock and reggae in all their varieties, it was transgressive and subversive. As the French scholar Claude Chastagner wrote: “Rock is subversive because of the place it leaves

---

<sup>1</sup> Roger Sabin (Ed.), *Punk Rock So What?*, London, Routledge, 1999, p.5.

for the unarticulated, for the raw sound and the undocile body, because of the place it leaves for everything which dominant culture forms reject in the name of culture”.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the pop song has particular advantages as a form of artistic expression. It is very short: generally three minutes, is very accessible and does not require a large amount of capital to produce. The technology needed was getting cheaper in the 1970s. All this means it can say and mean things which are not intended to last. It can express just one musical idea, just one poetic idea or just one political idea. It is easy to memorize and thus can have substantial psychological effect since it can be repeated all day long, which is not the case with a novel or film.

If those are some of popular music’s major characteristics, I would like to go on to the first of my priority questions: What did people do with popular music in the 1970s? What role did popular music have in people's lives?

Popular music is not just a collection of texts and music, but a series of mass activities. What were the main aspects of this in the 1970s? The buying of vinyl records was certainly at the centre of popular music culture. In the early seventies, a “single” with two songs on it cost around 45 pence (the cost of five loaves of bread or about 45 minutes of work at the national average wage); an album cost four times as much. Changes in housing and smaller family sizes during the post-

---

<sup>2</sup> “Le rock est subversif par la place qu’il octroie à l’inarticulé, à l’informulé, au son brut et au corps indocile, à tout ce que les formes culturelles dominantes rejettent au nom de la culture.” Claude Chastagner, *De la culture rock*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011, p. 83.

war boom, as well as a certain prosperity, meant that ever more teenagers had their own bedrooms, equipped with a mono or stereo record player. The generalization of the cassette recorder allowed cheap sharing of music between friends, recording of unlimited amounts of music from the radio, and the development of the mix-tape.

With the rise of different variations on the **cassette deck**, adults could, for the first time, in the 1970s, listen to music they had chosen, in their cars.<sup>3</sup> When not in a car, silence was generally the rule, although the marketing of the boom box or “*ghetto blaster*”, in the middle of the decade, allowed streetwise youth to listen to and advertise the music they loved.

**Radio disc jockeys** on all-music radio were becoming more central. BBC Radio had reorganized itself completely in 1967, giving rise to Radio 1 (playing all new music) and Radio 2 (playing popular music from the previous 25 years). It was highly successful: in factories, lorry cabs, workshops or sorting offices across the country, the radio was never switched off, and audience participation was ensured by the playing of requests, dedications and pop quizzes.<sup>4</sup>

People, in particularly young men, formed thousands of **music groups**, particularly in the second half of the decade. This process was much aided by the availability of rooms in pubs to play in, to small audiences. Forming one’s own group was an important part of the ethics of punk: self-expression and spontaneity being key values. Famously, a punk fanzine, *Sideburns*, illustrated the fingering of three guitar chords,

---

<sup>3</sup> In 1970, half of all households owned a car.

<sup>4</sup> A short unofficial but useful history of the channel can be found at [http://www.radiorewind.co.uk/radio1/history\\_of\\_radio\\_1\\_details.htm](http://www.radiorewind.co.uk/radio1/history_of_radio_1_details.htm)

with the following caption: “This is a chord, this is another, this is a third. Now form a band.”

The period also saw a rapid increase in the number of **music festivals** in Britain. The first music festivals we would recognize as such were 1950s jazz festivals, offering innovative music, holiday freedom and a considerable amount of alcohol, but perhaps above all, offering a community feeling very different from that of the traditional neighbourhood. The places people lived and worked were being transformed by the rise of the new industries and of white-collar jobs. Young people were staying longer in education; average age at marriage was rising. Transport was easier, with hitchhiking very popular among the young. The festival offered an atmosphere of freedom different from the still very much rules-driven world of the streets where everyone knew everyone else, or of the dance hall with its foxtrots, two steps and “excuse-me dances”.

The festival was a celebration of collective hedonism and novelty. When in 1974, Edward Heath was appealing to the spirit of the Blitz and of patriotic stoicism to help him through the crisis, many young adults preferred the mud and excitement of escape to a music festival.

After the legendary Woodstock festival in the USA in 1969, free festivals sprung up in Britain, such as the Glastonbury Free Festival, in 1971. The Isle of Wight festival (in 1968, 1969 and 1970) was no doubt the first one that aimed at being commercially viable, and the organizers had tremendous difficulties dealing with the thousands of fans who had come without tickets on the basis that music festivals should be free.

Glastonbury symbolized that impression that festivals were about much more than music, both because it was, at this time, free (A 2017 ticket cost £228). But also, its location was chosen due to its closeness to the prehistoric site of Stonehenge. A return to spiritual roots was part of the attractions of Glastonbury, based on an invented history of Stonehenge, linking it to pagan druids. From Glastonbury festival, developed groups of New Age Travellers, who would tour the free festivals of Britain, making a meagre living selling home-made jewellery or other artisanal products. This hippy subculture was one example of the depth of identification with music and popular culture which became periodically possible from the 1960s on. One was no longer obliged to simply be “someone who likes punk music, mod music or heavy metal”: one could “be” a mod in the 1960s or be a punk in the 1970s”. Such levels of identification had in early periods been reserved to the artistes. In 1910 a singer might “be” a showman, but a member of the audience was just a member of the audience, and new musical forms such as ragtime could not produce highly active subcultures.

### **What voices can be heard in British popular music in the 1970s?**

To move on from collective music-related activities, we might interest ourselves in the source of the values and messages of 1970s popular music. Whose voices were being heard? Gendered voices and class voices come immediately to mind.

Certainly, the predominance of the male point of view in rock songs was an important aspect of 1970s popular music, as it was in other decades. Songwriters were almost all men, as were artistic managers.

Indeed, a key aspect of many of the popular music genres of the 1970s was their proposing of different ways of performing masculinity, in the new society which was emerging from challenges to rigid traditionalism, challenges coming from the new visibility of gays, from women's liberation movements, but also from the decline of manual work, the smaller families giving more space for women in the public sphere, and the rise of professions seen as "less virile".

Of course, many aspects of emotional experience in twentieth century society are similar for men and women, and so women could easily identify with many songs written by men and vice versa. Nevertheless, very frequently, clearly masculine preoccupations and fantasies are at the heart of rock lyrics.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say the female minority was not significant. Kate Bush,<sup>6</sup> Joan Armatrading,<sup>7</sup> Christine McVie (of Fleetwood Mac), Siouxsie (of Siouxsie and the Banshees)<sup>8</sup> wrote songs well-known in the mainstream. Sandy Denny wrote and sang some of the milieu's favourite folk and folk-rock songs.<sup>9</sup> Poly Styrene, from punk band X-Ray Spex was another notable exception. The Slits and the Raincoats were bands built around women who made important contributions to post-punk music.

Suzie Quatro made a particular contribution as a glam rock style bass player and singer who took up many of the performance codes generally reserved to men: the low slung electric guitar, suggestive dominant sexual movements and growling voice.<sup>10</sup> Her example

---

<sup>5</sup> Wizzard's song "See My Baby Jive" will serve as a handy example.

<sup>6</sup> See her debut album *The Kick Inside* from 1978.

<sup>7</sup> See her debut album *Whatever's for Us* from 1978.

<sup>8</sup> See their debut album *The Scream* from 1978.

<sup>9</sup> See her first solo album *The North Star Grassman and the Ravens* from 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Auslander "I Wanna Be Your Man: Suzi Quatro's Musical Androgyny".

showed that the attraction of movements and sounds generally associated with men could be more universal. This question of what was masculine, or even macho, about rock music and whether it was essentially so or could also be adapted to a wider set of identities and voices, was discussed in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. The popular women's liberation magazine, *Spare Rib*, included manifestos, debates and analyses from "women in rock collectives" around the country. A "women in music" conference was held in 1973 by leading rock paper *Melody Maker*<sup>11</sup> In addition there were practical initiatives such as the founding, in the USA, of an all-woman recording company, Olivia Records, or a London distribution company for feminist records, Women's Revolutions per Minute, aiming at promoting "an autonomous music industry".<sup>12</sup>

If in the question of gender, it was the gender dominant in society whose voice was heard, in questions of class and ethnicity, popular music appears to have had more space for subaltern voices. Clearly the dark punk and other lyrics about unemployment, drink, alienation and violence appear as working-class voices, whereas reggae<sup>13</sup> gave considerable expression to non-white voices belonging to immigrants and descendants of Caribbean immigrants.

### **Why were new genres possible and what was new about them?**

Another important group of questions is about musical genre. To examine the myriad of popular songs of the decade, one is obliged

---

*Popular Music*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Jan., 2004).

<sup>11</sup> *Spare Rib*, January 1974, p 44

<sup>12</sup> *Spare Rib* August 1979, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to other forms such as Calypso less present in public debate.

to break them down into a smallish number of genres. For the 1970s, we habitually speak of such genres as glam rock, progressive rock, folk rock, punk, reggae, metal or synth pop. These categories by no means exhaust the mountain of vinyl which is seventies music, but they allow us to discuss certain innovatory trends.

**Glam rock** featured flamboyant or androgynous dressing and texts about love and partying or about fantasy.<sup>14</sup> The names of many stars – Wizzard, The Sweet,<sup>15</sup> The Glitter Band, Alvin Stardust – translate the atmosphere, while David Bowie was the key figure who finally transcended the genre.<sup>16</sup> The theatrical flamboyance of glam rock went further in individual self-expression than the rock and roll of the 1960s, and the ambiguous sexualities often celebrated were part of a longer trend to wider bounds of acceptability.

Glam rock, in underlining the fabricated stage image as play and as theatre (see for example Bowie's playing the character of Ziggy Stardust and later of Aladdin Sane), challenged an important ideological tradition of previous popular musical forms: that of authenticity. Honest down-to-earth authenticity was at the centre of the folk aesthetic (particularly in Britain where many folk clubs even insisted that an artiste only sing traditional songs originating from their own region). And, according to the tradition of blues and psychedelic rock, the musical performance should be a natural authentic outpouring of the creative and emotional content of the soul: singers and guitarists were meant to perform almost in a trance. Glam rock undermined these

---

<sup>14</sup> Slade's "Cum on Feel the Noize" or Mud's "Tiger Feet" are fair examples.

<sup>15</sup> See their song "Ballroom Blitz".

<sup>16</sup> Slik, Pilot and Fox were three more well-known bands. The output of any of these artistes is easy to explore on Youtube.

myths by putting forward the artificial and the fabricated. It also emphasized the visual part of the show: lights, make-up and costume, in contrast to the centrality of the music defended by progressive rockers and others.

Glam rock attracted a significant mass following among working-class young people, especially young men, straight as well as gay, because it allowed the performance of masculinity to be individual, flamboyant and creative, rather than collective and taciturn as working-class masculinity had often appeared. It has been suggested that working-class men aspiring to upward mobility were particularly sensitive to this genre of music.<sup>17</sup>

**Metal**, known at the time as heavy metal, also carried a good dose of theatricality. It, too, represented, among other things, a choice of how to perform masculinity, but the preference was more for sinister, aggressive sexuality than the elegant androgyny common in Glam. The metal genre was characterized by much higher volume than was traditional, by emphatic, jerky rhythm, and an original use of voice. Screaming, instead of being left as a form of articulation completely outside the field of artistic endeavour, was brought into the fold.

Themes were often dark: Satanism, drug taking, war and sadomasochism were very much present. Black Sabbath's albums around this time include the four titles *Paranoid*, *Sabotage*, *Heaven and hell* and *Mob Rules*. Deep Purple's include *Fireball*, *Machine Head*,

---

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Branch, "Social Mobility, Masculinity And Popular Music: The Case Of Glam Rock". Unpublished Ph D Thesis, University of East London, 2010.

*Burn* and *Stormbringer*. Judas Priest's albums include *Sin after Sin*, *Killing Machine* and *Screaming for Vengeance*.

Early key group, Black Sabbath, were working-class young men from the industrial parts of Birmingham. When interviewed about what made them produce such music, they emphasized their dissatisfaction with the hippie/Woodstock aesthetic, as well as the noises such as those of the industrial steam hammers they were used to hearing in their neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup>

Peace and love was not necessarily our reality. We came from Aston, which was a pretty rough and tough area in Birmingham. And there wasn't a whole lot of flowers being handed out in Aston. [...]

We didn't actually embrace the possibility of going to San Francisco with flowers in our hair for very long. It was a couple of months in 1967. Then by the time the British winter started to bite, normally somewhere in October, I personally binned my belt and beads and the caftan wasn't keeping me too warm. We were just reflecting on what our reality really did feel like.

Bands from Manchester and Newcastle followed fast upon Birmingham. But if it was initially moved by a desire to contest a previous style of popular music (as is generally the case with new rock genres), heavy metal would be received by its audience as a way to contest other dominant attitudes. When they toured the United States in

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview in the BBC documentary "Heavy Metal Britannia"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlpVVicUuQ8>

the early 1970s, Black Sabbath's loud screaming vocals and distorted guitar gained considerably more popularity than in the UK, and appealed particularly to crowds of Vietnam War veterans who came to their concerts. Back in Britain, in 1972 or 1974, heavy metal may well have been an aesthetic rebellion both against upbeat, ambitious, optimistic, smartly dressed, establishment ways of life, and against elite appeals to the spirit of the Blitz and patriotic stoicism in times of crisis.

Those artistes grouped together under the genre label “**progressive rock**”, sometimes classically trained,<sup>19</sup> recorded longer pieces, wanted coherent “concept albums” to be at the centre of their work, and eschewed the sexually boastful on-stage presence which had been part of the rock and roll experience. They represented a current which intended its work to remain relevant for many decades and not to be ephemeral.

**Folk** singing was, among other things, a way of performing national or regional identity. In particular, it was about performing Englishness, Irishness or Scottishness (in the 1970s, Welshness was mostly performed in the Welsh language and so relatively cut off from mainstream record markets and concert circuits). One could not imagine “British folk music”, it had to be rooted in one and only one of the constituent nations of the British Isles.

**Reggae**, which had come to 1960s Britain from Jamaica, had initially been limited to West Indian communities in the bigger towns. Its texts in Jamaican dialect, rebellious attitude and bass-dominated beat had represented for young British West Indians something of their own

---

<sup>19</sup> Pink Floyd, Genesis, Yes, Jethro Tull, Led Zeppelin, ELP and King Crimson are among the most commonly cited.

in these times before multicultural education. It thus became a way of performing Blackness in a positive, laid-back, generally nonviolent but combative, style. When examining reggae, it must be remembered that, in the mass activities which are popular music, performing identity is not limited to the “real possessors” of a given identity. As long as the song or the concert lasts, the young white student can sing along, imagining themselves as a marginalized Rastafarian.

This is one of the key strengths of popular music in general. The timid bookish youngster at a heavy metal concert imagines himself as a virile Satanist from the first note to the last; the teenage male glam fan imagines what it would be like to wear makeup and create himself an elegant androgynous personality; the respectable young woman fan of iconoclastic punk singers, male or female, imagines herself expressing anger and cynicism in public.

The 1970s was the decade reggae moved into the mainstream in the UK, symbolizing the desire of young West Indians to be publicly part of British life on their own terms, and showing their rejection of their parents’ deferential attitudes to the “Mother country”. Bob Marley’s work made reggae universally known: his album *Catch a Fire* in 1973 was his first hit album in the UK, and *Exodus* (1977) perhaps the most influential. Aswad (formed in 1975) and the more political Steel Pulse<sup>20</sup> (formed the same year) were the most successful of the bands formed by UK born descendants of West Indian families.

**Punk rock**, part artistic rebellion and part popular revolt, was more purely a product of the seventies. It was made possible because of

---

<sup>20</sup> Their albums included *Handsworth Revolution* (1978) and *Tribute to the Martyrs* (1979).

previous musical activities. From the early seventies, the phenomenon of “pub rock” had grown up, encouraging pubs to rent out rooms for small concerts, and encouraging large numbers of young people to form rock groups. Pub rockers wanted to be involved in music making, and close to their audiences, and distrusted the huge concerts of what was becoming known as stadium rock.

From a purely musical point of view, punk rock did not bring much innovation apart from an accelerated rhythm, a prominence for the drums and a preferring of rapid start-up in a song to gradual build-up. Its main contribution lay elsewhere. Punk’s emergence in 1976 was an aesthetic response to the social and political crisis, but also a grass roots rock movement protesting against the loss of rebellious spirit in rock, now frequently represented by superstars playing in stadiums for millions of dollars. Born in the art schools, it rapidly gained popularity among working-class youth.

The punk narrator is often a bitter, sarcastic loser, and sarcasm in popular music had before that time been very rare. The Sex Pistols songs “Pretty Vacant” and “God Save the Queen” are the most iconic examples. The genre reacted against sophisticated and overlong virtuoso prog rock productions and against cheerful disco dancing hits to sing instead a grittier malaise. Punk seemed to open the gates to dealing with a much wider variety of themes in popular song, with a particular emphasis on the gritty. So, urban rebellion,<sup>21</sup> mental health<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> The Clash, “White Riot”

<sup>22</sup> The Undertones, “Jimmy, Jimmy”.

Northern Irish politics,<sup>23</sup> masturbation<sup>24</sup> parental pressure for success,<sup>25</sup> or women's body image in society,<sup>26</sup> and many dozens of other topics were dealt with.

In the last few years of the decade, the **synth pop** genre emerged. Partly inspired by the German group Kraftwerk, this genre was aiming not at exploring new kinds of lyrical content or theatrical communication, but on producing new sounds, with the different kinds of synthesizer newly available commercially, or rigged up from spare parts by enthusiasts.

Kraftwerk's first appearance on UK television was on the popular science programme *Tomorrow's World* which aimed at showing people the technologies which were going to change their future.<sup>27</sup> The influence of Kraftwerk led some of those influenced by the Do It Yourself aesthetic of punk, to want to produce very new sounds. Out went all the guitars, drums and bass, to be replaced by synthesizers which had previously served only as an "extra" instrument in progressive rock bands. The genre of synth pop evolved very rapidly indeed. Before 1975 synthesizers were extremely expensive, more expensive than a car for example. Prices fell sharply towards the end of the 1970s, and this encouraged the rise of the genre. Tubeway Army<sup>28</sup>, Ultravox<sup>29</sup> and The Human League<sup>30</sup> were important names.

---

<sup>23</sup> Stiff Little Fingers, "Suspect Device".

<sup>24</sup> The Buzzcocks, "Orgasm Addict".

<sup>25</sup> XTC "Making Plans for Nigel".

<sup>26</sup> Crass "Shaved Women".

<sup>27</sup> An extract is available here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl46bxHuyR8>

<sup>28</sup> Their first album, entitled *Tubeway Army*, was released in 1978.

<sup>29</sup> Their first album was *Ultravox !* in 1977.

<sup>30</sup> Their first album was *Reproduction* in 1979.

## **Music and politics**

This brief survey of musical genres has looked at their capacities to address some of the aesthetic and spiritual needs of a generation. But what of the political needs? The final question I wish to examine is “What effect did political music have in the 1970s?” This is a huge question, and the debate has often been polarized between the thesis that it is “obvious” that rock music changes the world and the opposite thesis that political popular music can only be preaching to the converted, or, worse, producing symbolic rebellion which is a brake on real rebellion. Britain in the 1970s, perhaps unsurprisingly given the social conflicts raging, produced a considerable corpus of political music.

There are (at least) three ways in which such music can try to make a difference. Firstly, through storytelling, in particular telling subaltern stories to mass audiences. When Rod Stewart, already a huge star, reached number 2 in the UK charts with “The Killing of Georgie” in 1976, a piece about a young homosexual thrown out of his home by his family and then killed by a homophobic street gang, the story telling was heard by millions of people and was found moving, even in an extremely homophobic decade.<sup>31</sup> The lyrics gave, to a mass audience, a concrete glimpse of the functioning of homophobia, at a time when there would have been, for example, no school curriculum content on the subject.

His mother’s tears fell in vain

---

<sup>31</sup> As a reminder, the very first member of parliament to declare his homosexuality in public did so in 1984, and the first ever Conservative member of parliament did so in 2002

the afternoon George tried to explain  
That he needed love like all the rest  
Pa said, "There must be a mistake:  
how can my son not be straight  
After all I've said and done for him?"

The stories told in song can be of unknown or fictional characters, or of those who have come to fame in a political context. The song, "Biko" released by Peter Gabriel at the end of the decade, in homage to the Black South African leader murdered in a police cell, is an example of the second. A comprehensive attempt at evaluating the song's political effectiveness has been carried out by a South African researcher, Michael Drewett.<sup>32</sup>

Secondly, popular song can invite the listener to try out a narrator position for themselves. The "message" of political songs is not usually about transmitting information. Popular songs are meant to be listened to many times, and singing along, out loud or silently, is an important part of the experience. The listener/co-singer is asked for a few minutes to imagine that they are the narrator, the singer, or both. Songs can, then, encourage the listener to play the role of political commentator, suffering victim, powerful rebel and many other roles.

---

<sup>32</sup> Michael Drewett, "The Eyes of the World Are Watching Now: The Political Effectiveness of 'Biko' by Peter Gabriel". *Popular Music and Society*, Vol 30, N° 1, 2007

Two examples will suffice. One of the most popular songs of the 1970s<sup>33</sup> invites audiences to denounce, in non-standard English and with some hyperbole, the crueller sides of mass schooling.

We don't need no education  
We don't need no thought control  
No dark sarcasm in the classroom  
Teacher, leave those kids alone  
All in all, you're just another brick in the wall.

Its tremendous popularity must indicate something about the mass experience of schooling in a decade of rapid change.

Another notable example from the 1970s was a song by the Tom Robinson Band: "Sing If You're Glad to Be Gay".<sup>34</sup> The verses ironized about the supposed freedom enjoyed by gays since the legalization of homosexuality in the late sixties. The chorus invited everyone – straight or gay – to imagine themselves briefly as a publicly declared, happy and proud gay person singing it out loud. In a decade in which the majority of gays were not easily accepted even by their closest family, this was a powerful contradiction to the oppression, and this kind of participatory theatre might help audiences to change their views. Since invisibility is a key element of this oppression, the effect was even more forceful.

---

<sup>33</sup> Which even led the Marist priest who was headmaster of my high school to denounce its message in school assembly, though he showed a mediocre grasp of the meaning of the lyrics.

<sup>34</sup> This website has comprehensive information about the song and its reception : <http://gladtobegay.net/>

Thirdly and lastly, music networks and activities could be used to mobilize and publicize political discourses. The Rock against Racism movement, which organized from 1977 on several hundred concerts with punk and reggae groups on the same bill, and produced millions of leaflets and bulletins to contradict the propaganda of the far right, has become the most well-known example.<sup>35</sup> There is no space to analyze it here, but significant work has been done on this.

This review of some, hopefully productive, questions on 1970s popular music and society has attempted to present a wide variety of interrogations, but all of them concentrated on a vision of popular culture as mass activity, and the analysis of popular music repertoires and processes as one aspect of a history from below which, although recognized as important in historical circles for a number of decades, is not always as present in public debate as it might be.

### **Works cited**

AUSLANDER, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

AUSLANDER, Philip. "I Wanna Be Your Man: Suzi Quatro's Musical Androgyny". *Popular Music*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2004

BRANCH, Andrew. "Social Mobility, Masculinity And Popular Music: The Case Of Glam Rock". Unpublished Ph D Thesis, University of East London, 2010.

CHASTAGNER, Claude. *De la culture rock*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011.

---

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of debates about its influence, see Ian Goodyer, "Rock against Racism: Multiculturalism and Political Mobilization", 1976–81, *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 2003.

DREWETT, Michael. "The Eyes of the World Are Watching Now: The Political Effectiveness of 'Biko' by Peter Gabriel". *Popular Music and Society*, Vol 30, N° 1, 2007.

GOODYER, Ian. "Rock against racism: Multiculturalism and political mobilization, 1976–81". *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 22:1, 2003.

SABIN, Roger (ed.). *Punk Rock So What?*. London: Routledge, 1999.

John Mullen is full professor in British Studies at the University of Rouen. He is the author of numerous articles and chapters, in English and in French, on the history of British popular music (see <https://univ-rouen.academia.edu/JohnMullen>), and also of the book *The Show Must Go On: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War*, published in 2015 by Ashgate/Routledge. He is at present working on a new edited volume *No Business like Show Business: Popular Song across the World during the First World War*.