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Popular Music Interest Group
Panel Discussion

ABSTRACTS

Robin Attas, “Personalizing the Urban Ethos”

When grunge hit the mainstream, I was a twelve-year-old girl just entering grade seven in a small 1500-person town in a forested region of rural Manitoba, Canada. The space and place I inhabited (both externally and internally) was strikingly different from the urban ethos projected by the collection of Seattle-based artists. In my presentation I will question how the urban ethos of grunge generally, and of Nirvana and Soundgarden specifically, was able to speak to me across geographic differences, and how my particular geographic circumstances may have modified (or not) the sense of urban ethos that I received from these musicians’ work.

To put it another way I will use my personal experiences to answer two questions:

- What happens when a particular projection of urban ethos (in this case, that articulated by 1990s Seattle-based grunge artists) is received in a location far removed from its environment?
- How does the particular place of reception influence the interpretation of urban ethos and its impact on individual beliefs and appreciation for a particular type of music?

David Blake, “Sonic Cartographies and Cultural Geographies: Canonizing the Athens Sound”

Athens became a hotbed of college rock in the 1980s following the national success of the B-52s and R.E.M. Critics both outside and inside the scene lumped bands from the city together by making claims to an "Athens sound." Critical discourse generally defined the term by ascribing mythical power to aspects of the Georgian landscape (the summer heat, kudzu, etc.), presenting the scene as a folk utopia distant from the larger post-punk scenes in New York or LA. This paper argues instead that the Athens sound specifically derived from the cultural geography of the college town. The “Athens sound” took shape as a group of artists acquired cultural and financial capital in a manner reflecting prominent sociocultural characteristics of college towns, such as youth culture, artistic exploration, liberal politics, and acceptability of eccentricity. Sonically recognizable features of these artists' music in distinction to perceptions of mainstream and southern rock then became cited as unique to musicians from that particular place, becoming a canon of influence for later artists.

This paper describes three musical features described in interviews as central to the Athens sound: timbral differentiation, amateur technical skill, and rhythmic propulsion. These characteristics are analyzed in two songs by Athens bands: Pylon’s “Cool” (1979) and R.E.M.’s “Wolves, Lower” (1983). While these aspects reflect other concurrent post-punk music scenes, my paper demonstrates that these sonic features become articulated with, and canonized via, sonic differentiation and individualistic self-exploration through local and translocal aspects of

Athens's cultural geography. In doing so, I argue for the importance of institutions and dispositions in connecting sounds with sites.

Thomas Robinson, “Martin Hannett’s Mancunian Sound”

For decades, Manchester has been home to numerous pop-music notables, from Herman’s Hermits in the 60s, to 10cc in the 70s, and to Oasis in the 90’s. However, the peak of its influence, on punk and post-punk music anyway, most certainly falls between 1976 and 1985. This industrial city in economic decline inspired, indirectly and often directly, the highly acclaimed and influential music of The Smiths, The Fall, and, perhaps most of all, Joy Division. Leonard Nevarez (2013) details (and critiques) how Joy Division’s music not only reflected its city of origin but also came to be the very sound of Manchester in the ears of its fans.

An important figure in this great flourishing was producer Martin Hannett. Soon after London unleashed the Sex Pistols on his city in a legendary 1976 tour, Hannett (as “Martin Zero”) delivered for Manchester a “regionalist blow against the capital”: The Buzzcocks’ first record, *Spiral Scratch* (Reynolds 2005). Later, as house record producer and partner, he was responsible for the distinctive sound of artists on Manchester’s Factory Records, such as Joy Division/New Order, A Certain Ratio, and The Durutti Column. After his falling out and legal battle with the label, Hannett remained a freelance producer, shaping the music of The Stone Roses, Happy Mondays, and other acts of the late-80s “Madchester” scene.

This talk takes a close look at key tracks from the artists mentioned above, distinguishing Hannett’s contributions (reverb, echo, loops, etc.) from those of the writers, singers, and instrumentalists. Hannett, himself, has acknowledged his individual role in the music’s success: “You could wack it [reverb] into little attention-grabbing things, into the ambient environment, just in case interest was flagging in the music” (Savage 1992). His trademark production techniques contributed to a unique sense of space in a way that the foundational elements themselves—the original utterances of the performers—could not.

Joti Rockwell, “Mashing down Babylon?: Bad Brains, Urban Geography, and Hardcore Music in Washington, DC”

American popular music in the 1980s and early 1990s experienced a shift toward homogeneity and corporate consolidation, as radio stations fell under the same ownership and as major labels accounted for the vast majority of record sales. At the same time, regional music flourished often on the basis of its local identity, such that urban geography could not only circumscribe reasonably independent musical scenes but could also be a vehicle for bringing regionally-defined genres--e.g., gangsta rap in Los Angeles or grunge in Seattle--mass appeal.

One scene that lacked the mainstream success of Los Angeles or Seattle but has nonetheless figured prominently in rock histories of the period is that of hardcore in Washington, DC. Coming on the heels of punk music, hardcore would carry many of punk’s aesthetics, social currents, and musical attitudes toward indie rock, grunge, and other later styles, and central figures included Bad Brains, Minor Threat, and numerous artists who recorded for Dischord Records.

Taking 1980s recordings by Bad Brains as a case study, my presentation examines the sonic role hardcore played in representing what Adam Krims would call the “urban ethos” of the nation’s capitol. Acknowledging Krims’s critique of the “resistance industry” in music scholarship, I highlight ways in which Bad Brains recordings can be heard as articulating the urban political symbols they rally against. Specifically, stylistic and generic hybridity in Bad Brains music can be interpreted as a constructive force as much as a sign of cultural rebellion.