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CAN MUSIC PROGRESS? REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF POPULAR MUSIC

Abstract**:** This paper considers schematically the various discourses through which popular music history is understood. My proposal is that five accounts of musical history (the business model, the musicological model, the sociological model, the historical model and the art history model) are commonly deployed in popular music discourse. One implies, superficially at least, that popular music evolves, gets better; four implies that, at least in the longer term, it does not. The concept of 'progress' is shown to be problematic.

Key words**:** Popular music; history; progress; progressive rock.

Introduction: progressive rock

This paper was originally written as the keynote address for an international cross-disciplinary postgraduate conference entitled 'Evolutions'. My brief was to consider the evolution of popular music, a concept which I translated into a question which had often bothered me when I was a practicing rock critic: can popular music be said to progress? 'Progress' is an odd term in popular music discourse. The word 'progressive' has been deployed in various musical genres – progressive country music, progressive jazz, progressive folk. But as a genre label it has been most significantly used in rock. *The Guardian* thus headlined its obituary of the musician, Pip Pyle (September 20 2006), "Innovative drummer at the heart of progressive rock", and suggested that he "encapsulated all that was groundbreaking in British progressive music in the shakeout from the 1960s". But what is clear in the paper's account of Pip Pyle's career – as a member of *Hatfield and the North*, *Gong*, *National Health* and numerous other bands – is that 'progressive rock' was not a stage pop music moved through on its way to somewhere else but, rather, describes a particular musical genre, whose popularity was small scale and short lived (and, quite soon, rooted in France and Germany rather than the UK). In the dominant discourse of both rock criticism and popular music studies, 'progressive rock' has been more often used negatively than positively as if, by its nature, popular music is something that shouldn't 'progress'. For most contemporary popular music critics 'progressive rock' describes a historical genre that is nowadays heard as rather ridiculous.

I started my rock writing career in the heyday of progressive rock, the early 1970s. At the time my response to this kind of music was muddled, a confusion of admiration (for its ambition) and irritation (with its pretension). Looking back at progressive rock now, from an academic perspective, I find it easier to disentangle the arguments. On the one hand, 'progressive rock' described various musical elements that were clearly emerging from the newly established, late 1960s distinction between rock and pop. Progressive rock thus involved, above all, complexity: this was music with complex melodic structures and time signatures, with constant rhythmic and narrative shifts. Progressive rock numbers tended to foreground the instrumental rather than lyrical aspects of songs, but the lyrics too aspired to complexity, complexity of language and mood, the poetic use of symbolism and word games, a deliberate pursuit of the opaque. Complex musical arrangements meant, in turn, particularly on stage, foregrounding band members' musicianship and technique, the control and display of sonic invention and instrumental virtuosity. The most obvious distinction between a progressive rock and a pop track was thus scale: a twenty-minute musical epic *versus* a three-minute pop song!

It was from this perspective that progressive rock could be heard to develop both the musical and cultural tendencies that had in the latter half of the 1960s begun to differentiate rock from pop, its consciously arty seriousness and self-importance. In this, progressive rock clearly drew conventions and practices from non-popular musical forms: from jazz (as is obvious in Pip Pyle's career) in terms of virtuosity and improvisation; from classical or, rather, contemporary academic or art music, in terms of instrumentation and scoring. And certainly for some progressive rock musicians, 'progress' meant moving out of pop/rock into the jazz and/or academic avant-garde worlds. Part of the thinking here (to which I was sensitive as a would-be rock critic) was that to be appreciated progressive rock needed the right kind of audience. Listeners had to 'progress' too, in terms of what they wanted from music, how and where they listened, with what listening equipment. If rock defined itself against pop as 'commercial music', progressive rock defined itself against pop as easy listening. It offered, rather, difficult listening and so called forth a new audience of progressive rock listeners, who equally saw themselves as *moving on* from pop.

On the other hand, though, to go back to my critical confusion in the 1970s, 'progressive rock' was still recognisably rock, and not jazz or art music. It still drew on obvious pop elements in its use of the song form; it still deployed blues structures and explored the sonic potential of amplified guitars/drums. Above all, its performance style and stage display

of musical personas were still rooted in showmanship. Compared to most 1970s jazz and art musicians, progressive rockers were deliberately humorous and self-mocking, playing with the trappings of stardom and, if not exactly crowd-pleasing, complicit with their audiences in the way their shows were mounted. Think, for example, of such pioneers of progressive rock as Frank Zappa, *Soft Machine* and *Can*.

In retrospect, then, I think it can be argued that if 'progressive rock' was a significant moment in rock history, its effects were felt along divergent historical paths. On the one hand, as a musical genre, progressive rock fed into the successful commercial stylisation of 'heavy rock'. The key bands here (following different musical routes) were *Led Zeppelin* and *Pink Floyd*, from which all stadium rock bands, from *U2* to *Muse*, could be said to descend. On the other hand, as an attitude and aspiration, the legacy of progressive rock can be traced in an avant-garde sensibility that has, on occasion, emerged in all subsequent rock genres. Progressive rock, to put this another way, left avant-garde artists of all sorts a model for the use rock/pop elements in their work. This lineage is traceable in such postpunk bands as *Père Ubu* and *Public Image*, but also in electronic, techno and other dance music forms throughout the 1990s.

Whatever its historical importance and continuing influence, however, the central conceit of progressive rock – its notion that popular music could and should indeed progress – seems to me even more problematic now than it did then. In the late 1960s it was widely argued that popular music was getting ever more interesting as a variety of musicians developed pop forms to explore unexpected musical, lyrical, cultural and political issues. By the mid-1970s such explorations seemed self-indulgent and wrong headed. The value of popular music was once more heard to lie in its simplicity and directness. And however this argument has gone since, there certainly isn't any consensus that popular music now is any better now that it was forty years ago, that its language, techniques or expressive principles have in any way 'progressed'. In fact, such an assertion would nowadays seem silly – this is no longer how rock is conceptualised. For the remainder of this paper I want to consider some reasons why this might be so, to examine schematically the dominant discourses of popular music history.

Writing the history of popular music

My proposal here is that five accounts of musical history are commonly deployed in popular music discourse. One implies, superficially at least, that popular music evolves, gets better; four imply that, at least in the longer term, it does not. I will proceed by examining each approach in turn.

a) the business model

By this I mean the model used both to make sense of the history of popular music as an industry and deployed by the industry itself as part of its sales process. In this model popular music does get better but this sense of progress derives from the combination of two rather different kinds of argument, the first about *technology*, the second about *fashion*.

The history of popular music is obviously implicated in the history of technology (and vice versa) and technological history is almost always understood in terms of progress. We therefore take it for granted that each new device for carrying or mediating music is better than (and effectively replaces) that which has gone before. Phonography gave way to electrical recording which gave way to analogue tape recording which gave way to digital recording which will doubtless give way to some thing else in the years to come. Each new method of recording is sold and often, indeed, experienced as better than what went before: offering a better sound and better 'fidelity' to the original performances that are being recorded; each new playback method is more convenient to use and manipulate, increases both the producer's and listener's abilities to achieve sonic perfection. That such changes in the ways in which music is produced/stored and retrieved/heard are changes for the better is a matter of common sense. To suggest otherwise (to prefer vinyl to CDs or mp3s, as I do) is regarded as eccentric. Richard Osborne quotes Compton Mackenzie's 1925 objection in *The Gramophone* (which he edited) to the replacement of acoustic by electrical recording:

> The exaggeration of sibilants by the new method is abominable, and there is often harshness which recalls some of the worst excesses of the past. The recording of massed strings is atrocious from an impressionistic standpoint. I don't want to hear symphonies with an American accent. I don't want blue-nose violins and Yankee clarinets. I don't want the piano to sound like a free-lunch counter.[1]

As Osborne suggests, this kind of argument (like those resisting the replacement of 78s by long-playing records, turntables by CD players, or CD collections by iPods) quickly becomes, as the each new technology is rolled out, incomprehensible.

Perhaps this is, at least in part, a result of the second sort of industry argument, about the effects of fashion. Like any other commodity producer, the music industry has to persuade consumers to keep acquiring

[1] Compton Mackenzie, 'Where We Stand', *The Gramophone*, Vol. III. No. 6 (November 1925), 254–60 (p. 267). Quoted in Richard Osborne: 'The Label' *Reseaux* 25 (141–142), 2007, 67–96 (p.88).

new goods (and music, unlike food or clothes, is not obviously used up). The popular recording industry, then, has traditionally marketed its wares with an emphasis on the new, 'the latest thing', with the implication that a new product, a new release, is a better product, will replace the old – in the shops, on radio playlists, in people's private listening habits. This is to reinforce the argument from technology. Popular music progresses. Each new record by an artist is better than the one before; each new technology of sound production/reproduction offers a better listening experience. Old sounds are 'out of date'.

Such marketing discourse has been familiar for a hundred years or more, and the subject of academic disdain for almost as long (as in T.W.Adorno's account of the culture industry, for example). But today it is not clear whether anyone (even in the industry) really believes it! There are a number of points to be made here. To begin with, technological changes in how sounds are carried don't necessarily impinge on people's understanding of the *musical* experience involved. It is, in fact, noteworthy how little popular musical principles have changed since the onset of recording. Just as the 'classical' music repertoire with which most people engage is much the same now as it was a hundred years ago so most basic pop forms (if not their degree of amplification) would still be recognisable to an early twentieth century listener. In the digital age, certainly, the success of new technological devices has been as dependent on the reselling of old sounds as the launching of new ones. The percentage of old to new product in sales figures has risen steadily since the launch of CDs (approaching 50% currently) and even such a fashion object as the iPod is (like the original 78 gramophone record) more significant for enabling individual consumers to listen on demand to music with which they are already familiar than as a device for downloading/hearing new or unfamiliar sounds.

At the same time, even more paradoxically, it is certainly arguable that 'anachronistic' music technologies continue to set the standards against which new devices are measured – the vinyl record didn't disappear but remains as a kind of reproof to the over-bright, over-compressed sound of digital playback, just as acoustic instruments are still the musical tools to whose subtlety and character digital instruments aspire. Indeed (and this is why even the music business belief in progress has become more complicated) one of the most significant effects of digital recording has been to freeze history. Old records going back to the origins of recording can be retrieved and remarketed; sound archives plundered more profitably and less riskily – by record company and iPod user alike–than new acts launched or listened to. The new still matters to the music industry but less so than it has ever done before.

b) the musicological model

One common way of understanding popular music is as a field made up of a number of genres – rock'n'roll, heavy metal, punk, reggae, Britpop, soul, grunge, rap, techno, progressive rock itself, etc. etc. etc. I don't want to go into the finer points of genre theory (and its problems) here but just note its historical assumptions, its account of how musical styles emerge, develop and decline. Genre theory is primarily concerned with popular music's formal qualities (which is why I call this model musicological, though the formal description involved is not just musical but may cover aspects of visual and performing style too).

Again this is a familiar discourse (commonly used in the music press, for example). In this historical narrative new genres are taken to emerge through the interstices of existing genres, or in the coming together of elements from previously separate kinds of music. Each new genre takes on its own characteristic form until it is 'perfected' (in some arguments this ideal form is immanent in its origins). Thereafter it decay*s*, is corrupted, loses audience interest and musical power, becomes 'a parody of itself', etc. Such critical clichés are well enough known and I don't need to say any more about them here. This is the normal historical narrative for all popular music genres (I cannot think of any exceptions) and has two characteristics that are therefore worth noting.

First, although what we have here is very clearly an organic or biological account of birth, development and decline, in music criticism the period of ageing/decline always seems to be much longer than the period of youth/growth or, at least, gets far more attention. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if a musical genre reaches self-consciousness – is recognised by performers and audiences as a new genre – at precisely at the moment when arguments begin as to whether or not it is now in decline.

Second, while the replacement of one genre by another is seen as inevitable, natural even, the overall history of genres (unlike the history of species) is not seen as cumulatively progressive, with each genre superior, richer, better adapted to the world than what went before. Rather, the model is Buddhist in its implications: popular music as an endlessly repeated cycle of genre birth/life/death.

In short, the genre model (the most common historical discourse among popular music devotees) feels like an argument about the inevitability of decay. Whatever the sense of progress such a narrative must at moments assume, its general sense is that music does not–cannot–progress for very long.

c) the sociological model

From a sociological point of view the history of music must be understood as an aspect of social history; musical changes reflect changes in society. We could expect then, that when a society is 'progressing' (in terms of technology, affluence, health and education, leisure time, social structures, human rights) its popular music would be progressive too. But in practice the issue is *how* society is taken to influence and shape popular music and this makes the story more complicated.

In Western capitalist countries since 1945 the social variable taken to be most significant for the sound and meaning of popular music has been age. The history of Western popular music has been related to demographic factors (such as the post-war baby boom) and the social role of popular music has been related to the growing up (or ageing process) and, in particular, to the social construction and experience of *youth*. Young people are thought to have the most emotional investment in music and popular music is believed to have its most significant impact on people's lives, on their identities, social networks, moral values and so forth when they are young. This means, paradoxically, that for grown-ups popular music always seems best to express the past, the sense of possibility that they no longer have. From this perspective, popular music cannot be heard to progress because its value is essentially frozen in time. Hence the common sociological observation that people value most highly the music to which they were committed to in their teens and early twenties; hence too the widely shared popular belief that new music gets worse as one gets older: young people today just can't play or sing or write tunes or even enjoy themselves on the dance floor as *we* used to do! In short, even if people's lives do get better as they get older, even if they believe they have, indeed, 'progressed', popular music is not included in the narrative of what such progress means.

Two other sociological arguments are familiar. The first understands musical change in terms of population movement – migration, urbanisation, globalisation, and so forth, changes that undermine 'traditional' or customary or established ways of doing things. Again, what is striking here is that whatever the overall material consequences of such change, in terms of such things as improved quality of life or greater opportunities for women or better conditions of childhood, musically such changes tend to be regarded negatively. There are familiar critical tropes here: describing, for example, how local, traditional, 'folk' music is commercialised, standardised, turned into something simply quaint. More generally, socio-musical history describes minority, marginal, idiosyncratic music moving into the international commercial mainstream, losing its specific regional or national character. In short, whatever the realities of

social progress (not least for musicians), discursively such change is almost always described negatively (hence the elaborate mechanisms for concealing such processes in the marketing of so-called world music). This is where the recurring concept of *authenticity* comes into critical play. The 'authentic' describes a musical form before 'progress' happens to it.

Another sociological approach is rather different. This suggests that what one might call the ideology of popular music – its account of how music should sound, what it is for – is related to broader cultural and aesthetic arguments. To put this more simply, it is a matter of historical record that musical *tastes* change. This is perhaps most obvious in performing styles. What seems sincere (or authentic) in one era can seem exaggerated and insincere in another. In the 'high' performing arts, good acting or opera singing or instrumental playing are judged differently now than even thirty years ago. Popular music similarly can and does simply sound old-fashioned (and in popular music this can be a matter too of recording sound, of changing studio conventions and technologies and instruments). Now it might seem to be necessarily the case that as accounts of musical excellence or correctness change so ways of doing things in the past will sound inadequate. But in the digital age the argument is not so clear-cut. The classical music world's exploration of 'authentic' historical instruments and performing styles is now echoed by suggestions in the popular music world that digital remixes of classic jazz and rock albums do not change them for the better. Indeed, I would argue that digital technology has confused the relationship of taste and history. Popular music is no longer rooted in a particular time and place but continually revived, remixed and re-released and until it occupies a kind of virtual, history-less space. For many of their listeners, the *Beatles* are as much a 1990s group (when the various digitally remixed anthology albums were released) as a 1960s one. In fact, it is hard now, in the CD age, to determine exactly what the *Beatles* 1960s sound was. There is a kind of musical progress here but by default and without any real sense of history. Old music is continuously being made new.

d) the historical model

Popular music histories have two main concerns: origins and lives.

By *origins* I mean the search for a founding moment of whatever musical world or genre is being studied: the first be-bop gig, the first rock'n'roll record, the first punk act. (This obviously relates to the kind of genre analysis that I've already discussed.) This approach is common in TV music history programmes, and the tone of such programmes,

whatever their chronological narrative, is that the excitement of popular music history comes from moving backwards from the present music (which is familiar) to its origins (which are not). Every TV series on popular music history I've ever watched gets duller the nearer it gets to the present.

In print, most popular music history is written through *lives*, in the form of biographies; as any visit to a large bookstore will confirm, biographies dominate the popular music shelves. The dynamic of the pop or rock biography is fairly consistent. Even if the life doesn't end literally in early death or burn out, the narrative convention is the *decline* of creativity as the artist's will and imagination are sapped by too much success (or too little), by wealth (or continued poverty), by personal and commercial pressures, by boredom, falling sales, rising sales, shooting up, settling down. Pop and rock are unusual artistic forms in that it is widely assumed that performers get less interesting as they get older (and increasingly play only their old numbers anyway). Is there any significant rock artist whose work is thought to have got steadily better? Even the positive reviewers of the last Bob Dylan album took it for granted that his new music wasn't – couldn't be – as important, startling or inspiring as the music he made that really mattered, in the 1960s. And this relates to the final model, that I will mention, if briefly.

e) the art history model

By this I mean the Romantic (nineteenth century) suggestion that there are some artists who can be removed from, *transcend* history: their value is timeless. Such artists' works are canonical; they reach 'humanity', generally defined, rather than audiences defined historically, by market or social forces. Popular music en bloc has, of course, been defined as outside this history-less history by the ideology of classical music; pop is too obviously functional, commercial, and crowd-pleasing to express eternal values. Nevertheless rock and other popular musical forms (jazz, country) have developed their own canons, halls of fame, and 'classic' works. What they haven't done successfully (jazz comes closest) is establish cultural traditions in institutional terms, in the form of conservatories, formal qualifications and master/pupil relations. And, for this reason, and unlike art music, pop and rock haven't established an institutionalised dialectic of tradition/innovation. A new band like the *Arctic Monkeys* is not difficult to place in rock stylistic terms but whether the group is valued by its fans as a 'traditional' or 'innovative' British indie rock band is much less easy to determine. By and large, though, over the last forty years of rock music new bands have been more often acclaimed for returning to the essence of rock'n'roll than for

developing something quite new. (The only exception to this argument I can think of in recent British popular music history is in the club/dance scene where innovation has sometimes been self-consciously pursued and honoured.)

Conclusion

What I suggest above, in schematic form, is that most discourses through which people understand popular music do not make sense of its history in terms of progress. Those that do (the industrial model, for instance) are treated with suspicion. What this perhaps surprising finding reflects, I believe, is the truism that popular music is rooted in people's sense of time passing, whether their own time (ageing, social change) or at the instant of hedonism as in dance music, and that time passing is mostly an occasion for regret. Regret, one could say, has been the essence of popular music (whatever its use for social excess and celebration) since its emergence as a commodity form in the context of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century, from the Irish song through the blues and old-time country music and Tin Pan Alley pop through to their various offspring.

To put this another way, the issue here is not whether or not popular music progresses but how popular music became the art form that best expressed the people's uneasy experience of 'progress', their doubts about the relentless effects of modernism and capitalism. Our understanding of nostalgia – as a feeling characteristic of modern life – is, I believe, defined musically, and that feeling is, in turn, central to the ways in which popular music is used and heard. Thus, to return to my starting point, 'progressive rock' itself became eventually, the object of an intensely nostalgic cult, a continuous search for listening experiences past, conducted on the internet, at fan conventions and, it has to be said, in the classroom by academics!

Сајмон Фрит

„МОЖЕ ЛИ ПОПУЛАРНА МУЗИКА ДА НАПРЕДУЈЕ?“
РАЗМИШЉАЊА О ИСТОРИЈИ ПОПУЛАРНЕ МУЗИКЕ
(*Резиме*)

„Прогрес“ је термин који се често употребљава у дискурсима популарне музике. Прогресивним се називају многи музички жанрови популарне културе, али се ипак најчешће говори о прогресивној рок музици. Почетком седамдесетих година 20. века синтагмом *прогресивни рок* означавана

је музика која је била сложенија од поп музике, и у извесном смислу показивала сличности са џез и класичним композицијама. Ипак, *прогресивни рок* никада није превазишао оквире популарне културе. Због тога се чини проблематичном идеја о томе да популарна музика може и треба да „напредује“.

Иако данас не постоји консензус о томе да ли је популарна музика напредовала током протеклих неколико деценија или није, постоји неколико дискурзивних модела (бизнис, музиколошки, социолошки, историјски модел и модел историје уметности) који се односе на овај проблем.

У бизнис моделу мишљења и говора о популарној музици уобичајено је да се историја популарне музике повезује са историјом технологије, пре свега са развојем носача звука. Пошто се историја технологије увек разматра у оквиру концепта о напретку, онда се исти начин поимања историје примењује и на историјат музике. Питање је, међутим, да ли данас ико верује у такав маркетиншки дискурс који афирмише и проглашава напредним само оно што је најновије на тржишту. Осим тога, парадоксално је да се управо развојем технологије чува „стара музика“ која, према мерилима из бизнис дискурса, не припада оквирима „напредне“ музике.

Музиколошки модел дискурса негира идеју о могућности прогреса популарне музике јер се темељи на разматрању настанка, развоја и пропадања разноврсних типова музике, односно сведочи о цикличној смени жанрова, а не о њиховом прогресу.

У социолошком моделу дискурса заступљен је став да је развој музике аналоган развоју друштва. Аналогије се могу успостављати на различитим нивоима, али се сваком аналогијом доказује да је упркос напретку друштва, напредак музике дискутабилан, односно немогућ.

Историјски дискурзивни модел подразумева изучавање почетака одређених музичких покрета, као и изучавање биографија музичара. Попут музиколошког модела, и историјски дискурс се темељи на наративу о пропадању (покрета или музичара), уместо о прогресу.

Ни дискурзивним моделом историје уметности се не заступа теза о могућности напретка популарне музике, већ се развија идеја о могућности трансцендирања историје и стварања „вечних“ вредности. Управо због постојања канона популарне музике, многи музичари се данас не баве развијањем, усавршавењем музичких форми, већ инспирацију налазе у старим, „класичним“ примерима популарне музичке културе.

Упркос свим наведеним разматрањима, ипак треба напоменути да дилема у вези с тим да ли популарна музика може да напредује има, заправо, секундарни значај. Много важније је питање како је популарна музика постала најбоље средство за изражавање оног нелагодног осећања изазваног „прогресом“ и другим последицама модернизма и капитализма.

(резиме сачинила Валентина Радоман)

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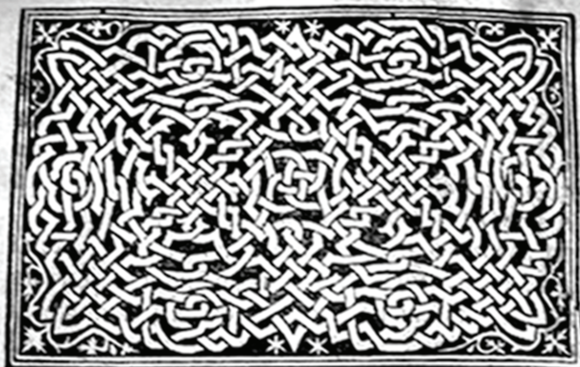

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