

Introduction

A Life-Changing Thing

I would hark back to, y'know, the birth of rock 'n' roll . . . and Elvis Presley, an' you get something that hasn't happened before, happening. Or perhaps, you get something happening which is, eh, a generational thing. I think in terms of music there are pivotal times . . . the birth of rock 'n' roll, punk, hip-hop, rave, for example . . . that so inspire a generation [such] that people are fundamentally changed by this happening . . . but [among] certain people who are susceptible to looking out for, y'know, something new, eh, the actual change in their lives is phenomenal. It dictates in a sense the rest of your life, because . . . the phenomen[on], whatever happens, has such a fundamental effect on you that it actually changes the course of your life. So, whereas it could be if punk never happened or if, y'know, I was ten years older, I would have perhaps missed out, or would have been led down different avenues. But 'cause, y'know, it did feel like, yeah, [punk] was a life-changing thing . . . an' I feel very privileged, as I think a lot of my contemporaries were, to [have] be[en] around at the time, when this was happening. (English male punk, aged forty-four)

The beginning of the twenty-first century marks an interesting and highly significant period in contemporary popular music history. Almost every living generation in the Westernized world has grown up in an age during which popular music has been a pivotal element of the global media and cultural industries, be it the advent of rock 'n' roll during the mid-1950s, the psychedelic and politicized rock of the late 1960s, the punk backlash of the mid-1970s, or the dance music explosion of the late 1980s. The sounds, styles, and cultural impact of each of these popular music eras have been vividly documented in books, magazine articles, motion pictures, and

television series. Indeed, such accounts of popular music's impact on youth and the wider society now form part of our general understanding of the cultural changes that swept through Western nations after 1950.

Far less well documented, however, are the more long-term effects on those individuals who passed through this “youthquake” (Leech 1973) on their way to adulthood. In 1983, Simon Frith suggested that “the sociology of rock is inseparable from the sociology of youth” (1983: 9). This statement may have been an astute observation at the time but today it appears more problematic. What is missing from Frith's observation—and something that has come to register ever more critically in the thirty years since it was made—is a sense of what happens to popular music audiences beyond the time of their youth—and whether musical tastes acquired as teenagers actively influence or shape subsequent biographical trajectories. Frith, of course, is not alone in this respect. In most academic and popular accounts of music and youth, the liminality of youth as a life stage and what subsequently becomes of those involved in music-driven youth cultures have never really been primary points for consideration.

This book constitutes an attempt to deal precisely with the question of how people move on from youth and effectively grow older with popular music. The book's starting point examines the notion that the cultural significance of popular music is no longer tied exclusively to youth and, for many people, the music that “mattered” to them in their youth continues to play an important role in their adult lives. Such importance, it is argued, goes well beyond the often cited “nostalgia value” of popular music. Rather than portraying a group of individuals yearning for a return to the days of their youth, I illustrate that aging audiences for popular music often exhibit a dynamic, shifting, and developing quality in their appreciation of music, its relevance to their everyday lives, and its broader sociocultural significance. It is further explained how, for many aging followers of rock, punk, dance, and other contemporary popular music genres, the cultural sensibilities they acquired as members of music-driven youth cultures have remained with them, shaping their life courses and becoming ingrained in their biographical trajectories and associated lifestyle sensibilities.

The book does not claim that a particular style of music will have the “same” effect on everyone, nor does it maintain that music continues to matter in the same way, or to the same degree, in each individual case. In conducting the research for this study, I encountered numerous people who described themselves as “ex” rockers, hippies, punks, and so on, the “ex” clearly demarcating this stage of their lives as something they felt they had left behind, something they regarded as an aspect of their “youth,” with no obvious ongoing significance to their post-youth lives. In one extreme example, a former punk, now in her mid-forties and living in northern France, claimed that trying to maintain an interest in punk beyond her teens would have been incompatible with the punk ethos, the latter connoting an “instant music and philosophy.”¹ At the same time, however, I also encountered a significant number of middle-aged popular music fans who did continue to identify themselves as hippies, punks, and so on. For these people, music and the associated lifestyle traits and/or ideologies that go with it have continued to matter in their lives in substantial ways and, in a number of cases, had a considerable impact on the direction of their lives in the intervening years since their youth.

I do not wish to suggest either that the topic of individuals aging with music is in any way exclusively associated with the musical and cultural genres examined in this book. The legions of aging jazz and swing fans are testimony to the established importance of music in people’s lives across generations and genres. Similarly, in their work on social dance in the third age, Cooper and Thomas argue that “social dance for older people, as for the young, produces and preserves a superior, symbolic generational identity” (2002: 703). I do, however, want to argue that the musical and associated cultural and stylistic examples chosen for study in this book mark a significant turning point in the history of Western popular music. I say this because these examples are all rooted in an era of burgeoning consumerism and mediatization in which connections between music and identity found a new level of immediacy. At the same time, the ways in which popular music were consumed and experienced from the early 1950s onward

1. Interview originally conducted in French with assistance from Hervé Glevarec. English translation provided by Hervé Glevarec.

opened up an ever-increasing universe of possibilities for the reflexive understanding and use of popular music as a cultural resource in everyday life.

The book's exploration of aging popular music audiences is presented in six chapters and divided into two main parts. Part I, comprising Chapters 1 and 2, seeks to contextualize the aging popular music audience both empirically and theoretically.

Chapter 1 begins by considering existing representations of aging popular music fans as they figure in journalistic and, to some extent, academic accounts. It is observed how such representations often rely on crudely devised labels, such as "old hippie" and, more recently, the "fifty quid man," to describe aging music fans and their cultural practices as essentially deviant. Such labels, it is argued, rely on an ageist discourse that paints a highly stereotypical and one-sided picture of the meaning of popular music in aging fans' lives.

The chapter then begins the task of remapping the sociocultural context of the aging popular music audience. In doing so, the chapter draws on the cultural sociological perspectives offered by Chaney (1996, 2002) and Giddens (1991) relating to reflexivity and identity in late modernity and applies these to the small extant literature on aging, consumerism, and popular culture. It is argued that, as with earlier stages in the life course, aging identities are now increasingly derived through texts, images, and other mediated leisure forms. Moving then to a discussion of how the music industry, together with other associated cultural industries, has responded to an aging consumer base, it is suggested that the objects, images, and texts produced with aging consumers in mind have a significance that goes well beyond their "nostalgia value." Thus, it is contested, for individuals who came of age in the burgeoning consumer society of the 1950s and 1960s and who thus take consumer lifestyles for granted as a part of their everyday cultural milieu, consumption of products such as CD reissues of classic albums, DVD versions of classic rock performances, and attendance at tribute band concerts need not merely constitute, as is often suggested, a nostalgic "harking back" to the time of one's youth. Rather, it is argued, such investment illustrates the way in which music has become an integral part of individual identity; music serves as a cultural backdrop for aging fans' lives in many ways,

informing a variety of social sensibilities that include, for example, the visual representation of the aging identity, choice of career path, relationships with family and peers, and political outlook. The prevalence of music in such contexts, it is suggested, relates in part to the loosening hold of traditional structural factors on individuals and the increasing importance of popular cultural resources as a means of forging and articulating social identities. Also significant, however, is the aging process itself. As music fans age, it is suggested, the meaning and significance of music become more steadily and subtly ingrained in their identities, to the extent that the “spectacular” forms of collective allegiance to musical styles often exhibited by younger fans become much less important than the personal connection one feels to music as an inspirational resource. For many aging fans, the experience of music becomes highly personal, its meaning interwoven with the biographical development of the individual. The final section of Chapter 1 extends this argument through an examination of the relationship between popular music, aging, and gender.

Chapter 2 provides theoretical models through which to investigate and interpret the relationship between popular music, aging, and identity. The chapter explores the work of Frith (1987) and DeNora (2000), which addresses the importance of music for individuals in mundane, everyday contexts. Such work, addressing as it does issues of biography, memory, and aesthetics, offers a particularly fertile starting point for an investigation of the highly personal, often complex introspective accounts of music meaning offered by individual aging music fans and the ways in such accounts map onto and are articulated by the aging process itself.

Later in the chapter, these ideas are linked with the concept of lifestyle as a means of illustrating how such individualized responses to music and its cultural resonances nonetheless cohere into collective forms of cultural practice. Using Chaney’s (1996) concept of lifestyle sites and strategies, I argue that aging music audiences produce, manage, and articulate identities through the appropriation, inscription, and representation of musical texts and associated resources into lifestyle projects that bond and cohere into collective forms of cultural practice. The resultant clusters of collective cultural practice, it is subsequently argued, can be most effectively theorized by drawing

on Peterson and Bennett's (2004) three-tier model of music scenes—"local," "translocal," and "virtual." In addition to allowing for the possibility of clusters of aging music fans who continue to use local networks of venues, bars, and record shops as gathering spaces, Peterson and Bennett's emphasis on the transnational and virtual elements of scene also allows for more temporal and individualized forms of fan practice that, as this book demonstrates, are often evident among older popular music fans. Finally, a new category, "affective scene," is introduced as a means of further finessing Peterson and Bennett's model and its applicability to the sociocultural context of the aging music audience.

Part II comprises four ethnographic case-study chapters focusing on specific aspects of the relationship between popular music, aging, and lifestyle.

Chapter 3 examines issues of visual appearance and body image among aging music audiences, looking specifically at the way fashion, hairstyle, and forms of body modification associated with particular genres of music are either managed or modified when music fans reach middle age and begin to contemplate later life. The chapter illustrates how, in keeping with other aspects of individual identity in late modernity, the aging body has become a reflexively articulated and individually constructed project. As illustrated, for many aging popular music fans, the process of aging has brought with it a new attitude toward visual image, one that downplays the visual with a new emphasis on the importance of more introspective, aesthetically situated sensibilities in relation to music and its impact on the life course. Thus, in the case of aging punks, who form a large part of the empirical case-study material presented in Chapter 3, if visual image was once a highly important aspect of their punk credentials, for many the need to "dress" punk has been replaced by a more introspective subscription to the punk ethos. The punk ethos allows for a more dressed down and, in some cases, barely discernible visual punk image. In justifying this modification of their visual image, older punks argue that their internalization of the punk message and worldview over the years has rendered the need for a visually obvious persona.

Chapter 4 considers the relationship between musical taste and choice of career path. Thus far, there has been little acknowledgment

in the academic literature of this relationship, the exception being studies of local music scenes that have focused on music-making itself and/or related activities as a form of work and possible route into the world of professional music-making. As Chapter 4 illustrates, however, music has had more far-reaching effects on the ways in which some aging fans have chosen careers and/or structured their working lives. Thus, for some older music fans, a long-term interest in music has led them to pursue what could broadly be referred to as “alternative” careers. For example, a number of aging punks embrace a strong DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetic, eschewing “nine-to-five” jobs and opting instead for self-made career paths that incorporate personal interests and lifestyle-related work projects. In other cases, a long-term interest in music has motivated some aging fans to become proactive in the preservation of particular music genres or in the dissemination of musical skills—for example, through launching independent record labels or working for local community projects aimed at providing music-making facilities and training for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. At other times, aging music fans working in more mainstream occupations have purposely chosen career paths that allow space and flexibility for continuing engagement with and participation in music-related practices that can be fitted in around a work schedule.

Chapter 5 focuses on issues of continuity and conflict among different generations of music fans. Although the primary purpose of this book is to examine the lifestyles and identities of aging music fans, as the ethnographic research conducted for the book illustrated to me, a number of aging fans continue to associate with music scenes that also attract younger people. It was also clear from the research that the nature of the relationship between aging music fans and their younger peers varies a great deal. Thus, some aging fans regard themselves as forefathers or mentors whose task is to oversee the development of newer, younger members of those music scenes in which they participate. This role may take a variety of forms, from imparting the “correct” cultural sensibilities to providing hands-on knowledge and know-how—as, for example, with aging members of a dance music collective who offer young dance music fans the opportunity to learn about the practicalities of staging dance parties. Family life

and responsibility for children have also acted as a driver for some aging fans to rethink and, in some cases, create new spaces for engagement with the dance party scene. The increasingly multigenerational nature of the mainstream music industry is also creating new sensibilities of age—and age acceptance—within local music-making scenes, as evidenced by the account of several interviewees regarding their involvement in multigenerational rock and pop bands. Finally, the chapter considers how parents and children often communicate via the medium of music—sharing ideas about music and trading musical tastes with each other. As is illustrated, such musicalized dialogues can often be an important source of bonding between parents and children.

Chapter 6 addresses the long-term influence of popular music on the political orientation and worldview of aging music fans, assessing the extent to which the ideologies of power, resistance, and defiance, as generated through particular musics, remain with and are adapted by fans as they grow older. The chapter first examines the long-term impact of politicized rock and its associated countercultural ideology among members of the baby-boomer generation, many of whom still continue to self-identify as hippies. Issues explored include how the political messages of rock, often cited as of key significance to hippie audiences in the 1960s, are perceived by some of those same “aging” hippies today. Also reviewed are the more long-term spiritual impacts of music from the countercultural era on aging baby-boomer listeners. I then discuss the legacy of punk ideology, as communicated through the music, for those who embraced it as teenagers and early twenty-somethings. I show that punk politics continue to play an important role in the lives of many aging punks. Within this discussion, it is also considered how the concept of anarchy, once a prominent byword for punk’s alternative political aspirations, has been reassessed by many older punks, who now view it as an overly negative and, in many ways, naive statement. Many older punks thus convey how the subversiveness of their punk youth has matured over the years into a more tolerant and worldly outlook, something that they feel sits well with an aging punk persona.

The conclusion of the book offers a series of speculative observations on how the aging baby-boomer and post-boomer generations’

transition from middle age to later life will bring with it new perceptions of eldership. Drawing on a collection of observations offered by aging music fans interviewed for this book, I show how, through their collective perceptions of what it means to grow old, baby-boomer and post-boomer generations bring with them new sets of demands and expectations regarding the quality of life in the third age. These expectations are assessed not merely in terms of access to basic facilities—food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, and so on—but also with reference to the preservation of those leisure and lifestyle resources that form the foundations upon which late modern identity and everyday culture are established.