Ethnography and popular music studies

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Simon Frith (1982) once bemoaned the fact that students would rather sit in the library and study popular music (mainly punk) in terms of the appropriate cultural theory, than conduct ethnographic research which would treat popular music as social practice and process. Ten years later the literature on popular music is still lacking in ethnography.

The term 'ethnography' generally refers to data derived from direct observation of behaviour in a particular society. It was a research method initially developed within social anthropology to tackle the problems of studying 'other' cultures, but it has become more popular across a wide variety of disciplines, and the range of methods and terms used to discuss research of an ethnographic type has become rather broad.[1] Consequently, much confusion surrounds ethnography, which is why this article defines the term in a narrower, and again more anthropological sense. Using case-studies, the potential of an ethnographic approach for the study of popular music will be explored.

Whilst significant advances have been made in our understanding of issues surrounding popular music production and consumption, it will be suggested that particular emphases within popular music studies (e.g. upon music as commodity, media, capital and technology), and a reliance upon theoretical models abstracted from empirical data, and upon statistical, textual and journalistic sources, needs to be balanced by a more ethnographic approach. Ideally, that approach should focus upon social relationships, emphasising music as social practice and process. It should also be comparative and holistic; historical and dialogical; reflexive and policy-oriented. It should emphasise, among other things, the dynamic complexities of situations within which abstract concepts and models are embedded, and which they often simplify or obscure. The social, cultural and historical specificity of events, activities, relationships and discourses should also be highlighted.

The anthropological use of ethnography

Within anthropology there has been much debate on ethnography, especially its status as a form of knowledge, and the ethnographer has been variously defined.[2] Generally speaking, ethnography in the anthropological sense is the description and interpretation of a way of life (or 'culture'). It involves a 'microsociological' focus upon the beliefs, values, rituals and general patterns of behaviour underlying social relationships or networks, hence anthropologists' concern with concepts of relatedness embodied in terms such as 'kinship', 'ethnicity', 'identity', 'society',

'culture' and 'community'. When analysing ethnography, a comparative approach is also important, comparing different groups or cultures and how they might classify people in different ways and organise and conceptualise relationships differently. Anthropology has also tended to be 'holistic' in that social relationships and activities are seen to have different dimensions: cultural, political, economic. The co-existence of these is examined in specific contexts, but they may also be situated within a broader and more historical context in order to look, for example, at the interrelationship of political, economic and cultural systems in particular times and places.

Ideally, ethnography involves a lengthy period of intimate study and residence with a particular group of people, knowledge of the spoken language, and the employment of a wide range of observational techniques, including prolonged face-to-face contacts with members of the local group, direct participation in some of that group's activities, and a greater emphasis on intensive work with informants than on the use of documentary and survey data. Basic to the conduct of research, therefore, is the development of relationships 'in the field'. Thus ethnography depends upon a complex interaction between the researcher and those who are researched. The anthropologist aims to learn the culture or subculture they are studying and come to interpret or experience it in the same way that those involved in that culture do, that is, to discover the way in which their social world or reality is constructed, and how particular events acquire meaning for them in particular situations.

Early anthropologists (for example, Mead and Malinowski) tended to view themselves as objective and neutral observers, to claim experiential authority and detachment, and to present their ethnographic text as if it were an interpretation of the natives' point of view. Later anthropologists (such as Geertz and Sperber) acted like 'literary interpreters', reading experience as if it were a text embodying 'unruly meanings', but leaving out of the 'final, representative text' any account of the actual research process and the relationships involved. Anthropologists have consistently emphasised that, by coming to understand 'another' culture through ethnographic research, the researcher can acquire a certain objectivity not available to members of that culture who live within it and might therefore be unconscious of some of its distinctive fundamental assumptions. But the 'objective', 'unreciprocal' stance of anthropologists has rightly been questioned, and the dichotomies of them and us, self and other, objective and subjective, challenged in favour of a more negotiated, reflexive, discursive or intersubjective model of ethnographic practice. Such a model might also be referred to as dialogical, in that the researcher visiting 'the field' enters a dialogue already in process, whereby relationships and practices are shaped by social context, and are part of an ongoing historical conversation (see Lipsitz 1989).

The ethnographer has come to be recognised as an active participant in the research process whose presence affects situations 'in the field'. Consequently, the ethnographic text becomes a version of reality created or concocted by the anthropologist in collaboration with her informants. Culture has come to be seen less as something 'out there' to be studied, and more as something 'invented' (Wagner 1975) or 'manufactured, both by informants and anthropologists and, in the process, as contested' (Caplan 1992, p. 69). Relations 'in the field' have thus come under closer scrutiny. Whilst it is important that ethnographers recognise and respect the existence and legitimacy of different perspectives and ways of knowing

which are historically and culturally specific, they should at the same time adopt a critical perspective, recognising the power relations embedded within the research situation, and those forms of belief or perspectives that limit or restrict human freedom.

'Western' anthropologists have only relatively recently begun to conduct research 'at home' within their own societies and cultures. They are still commonly typified as seeking out an exotic 'other', and within and outside British and American anthropology there has been much debate about the applicability of anthropological methods to the study of Western industrial society. Many have raised the issue of objectivity together with new problems regarding relations in the field and linked issues of ethics, accountability, politics and so on. Lawrence Grossberg (1989), for example, argues that the appropriation of ethnography in the anthropological sense into the field of cultural studies must involve a rearticulation of the ethnographic project and practice. He suggests that anthropology's focus upon the 'other', its boundaries between us and them, bear little relation to the situation of ethnography within the contemporary advanced industrial world of mass media, where the relationship between the strange and the familiar is increasingly difficult to define, and it is increasingly difficult to locate and identify consistent, isolable communities or bodies of texts and practices which can be taken as constitutive of the culture or the community.

But anthropology cannot be characterised as the study of isolable communities (how many such communities exist?). Anthropologists have a long established tradition of studying social networks or interest groups in their interaction with other social collectivities within urban settings. Furthermore, many anthropologists deliberately adopt a position of naivete and distance when writing ethnographies in order to make the familiar seem strange; and for some time now anthropologists have emphasised the relational character of the Other, that is 'the Other, not as a self-enclosed or independent object of study, but, rather, as an object that can be defined only in its relation to the researcher' (Grenier and Gilbault 1990, p. 393).[3] Hence strangeness, familiarity, otherness are shifting categories. A situation or friend can be both strange and familiar concurrently or at different times and in different contexts, and one can alter perspective, engaging with and distancing oneself from relationships and activities around one. A musical performance in an African village would certainly be very different from a rock gig in Liverpool, yet there will also be similarities, and both require knowledge of the specific social context in order to understand them. Likewise, contrasts and comparisons could be made between a rock gig and a classical concert in Liverpool, and in all situations people tend to act in surprising or contradictory, as well as predictable ways.

Ethnography in the anthropological sense has its limitations. It is small-scale and face-to-face, and this raises the problem of typicality – whether the small part studied can represent the whole – and the problem of incorporating detailed description which may seem banal or tedious. It also depends upon building up good relations with people and gaining access to their lives, and it can consequently require considerable investment of time and emotion. For many, it may be easier not to bother, but whilst an anthropological approach cannot simply be transferred or added on to that of other disciplines, cultural and popular music studies could learn much from current theories and debates within anthropology, and vice versa.

Popular music studies

Much important, innovative and exciting work has been, and is being, conducted in relation to popular music. The following few paragraphs select only a few aspects of just some of the work on rock and pop, not to criticise, but to indicate the potential for an alternative or complementary ethnographic perspective. It is common, for example, for journalistic or statistical sources to be used in the study of rock music, though they are notoriously unreliable and embody institutional constraints and manipulations (for instance, of magazines, record companies and radio stations; see Middleton 1990, p. 5). Frith (1982) has pointed out that a reliance upon such sources can lead to an acceptance of the ideology of rock they promote.

That ideology has influenced the choice of focus within popular music studies, leading, for example, to a concentration upon the small minority of professional performers and 'stars', rather than the vast majority of amateur music-makers. Middleton (1990, pp. 5–6), furthermore, refers to the privileging of the category of youth within popular music studies, and the neglect of older age groups who may use different musics and in different ways. It should be added that it is still overwhelmingly *male* youth (particularly of the working class) which has been privileged, and that the focus on youth has often been accompanied by a concern with fast-changing commodities and trends which downplays the elements of continuity that might also be present. Middleton (*ibid.*) points out that the focus upon commodities and their exchange has led to a neglect of the role of such commodities in cultural practice or 'way of life', and of non-commodity-form musical practice.

Much research on rock has been more influenced by linguistic, semiotic and musicological traditions than by the social sciences, and has relied upon textual sources and analysis. Tagg and Negus (1992) have noted that musicologists studying popular music still tend to ignore social context. Hence lyrical and musical texts may be deconstructed and their 'meaning' asserted, but the important question 'meaning for whom?' is often neglected.[4] Rock music is also frequently analysed in terms of the music industry and its networks of production, distribution and marketing, and in terms of technology, mass communication and global culture and capital. The latter are commonly depicted as acting upon individuals like 'forces' or 'flows', and as comprising various 'levels' (global and local, for example, or micro and macro) which seem to take on an existence of their own.

There has, for example, been a focus upon global processes of homogenisation or diversification and the fears or resistances they provoke, the conditions of fragmentation, placelessness and timelessness they give rise to (McLuhan 1967; Myerowitz 1985; Berland 1988; Wallis and Malm 1984). Theories of musical 'theft' describe new cultural and aesthetic attitudes, and new technologies, which have supposedly resulted in the plundering of different cultures or eras and the bringing together of rhythms, sounds and images from a multitude of diverse sources 'which often bear no apparent "natural" historical or geographical relation to each other' (Hebdige 1988). 'Musical and cultural styles ripped out of other contexts, stripped of their initial referents, circulate in such a manner that they represent nothing other than their own transitory presence', wrote Chambers (1985); this, he asserts, signifies the end of the logic of origins and the romantic 'moment of authenticity' (1985, p. 199).

Reynolds celebrates what he terms 'schizoid music', which represents the loss of a sense of past and future, spurns narrative and takes us 'nowhere . . . no place' (1990, pp. 138–9). Hip hop, for example, is described as a 'perpetual now', 'shallow, an array of surfaces', representing 'an end of history and an end of geography'. Meanwhile, Grossberg (1984, p. 231) suggests that rock'n'roll represents 'modes of survival within the post-modern world'. It reflects the aesthetic of post-modern practice with its 'emphasis on discontinuity, fragmentation and rupture; a denial of depth and a subsequent emphasis on the materiality of surfaces'. To anthropologists concerned with classification and difference involving the construction of identity and meaning, this focus upon a blurring of levels and categories, of places, spaces, times and identities, might seem rather naive. Such assertions, based upon little information about the ways in which people actually use and value this music, have been challenged by more ethnographic work based upon individuals and social groups, and upon their practices, meanings and discourse at a 'micro' level (see Lipsitz 1989; Porcello 1991; Cohen forthcoming a and b).

Within popular music studies, and even more within cultural studies generally, there has been a recent shift in perspective from the study of the global to that of the local, and from work on production to consideration of consumption, subjectivity and identity in the context of everyday life (Morley 1986; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; De Certeau 1980). Yet although some of this research has been referred to as 'ethnography', it is usually not ethnography in the anthropological sense. Many studies rely upon preformulated questionnaires, surveys, autobiographies or unstructured interviews which study people outside their usual social, spatial and temporal context. Their discourse is consequently disconnected from their day-to-day activities, relationships and experiences (and obviously, what people say they do often differs from what they actually do, or from what they think they do).[5]

Frith (1982) pointed out ten years ago that 'very little has been written about *how* commercial decisions are reached. We still don't know much about *how* musicians make their musical choices, how they define their social role, how they handle its contradictions' (Frith 1982, p. 9). Our knowledge of such issues may have increased slightly, but it is still the case that assumptions are made about popular music practices and processes supported by little empirical evidence.

Popular music ethnography

An ethnographic approach to the study of popular music, used alongside other methods (textual decoding, statistical analysis etc.), would emphasise that popular music is something created, used and interpreted by different individuals and groups. It is human activity involving social relationships, identities and collective practices. Ruth Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians* (1989), for example, is about the hitherto ignored amateur or 'grassroots' musicians in Milton Keynes, and it describes the extent, variety and richness of their music-making.[6]

The focus upon people and their musical practices and processes rather than upon structures, texts or products, illuminates the ways in which music is used and the important role that it plays in everyday life and in society generally. It contrasts with orthodox sociological accounts of media effects, 'passive' leisure, class characteristics, and so on. Finnegan considers the types of people involved

with music in Milton Keynes and finds a great mixture; this questions assumptions about musical practice based upon class, academic ability, even age.

She shows how difficult it is empirically to draw straight lines between social characteristics and musical activity. The usual social indicators of musical tastes (class, age, gender) are not good indicators of membership of musical worlds . . . Music, in short, is not simply used as a marker of existing social differences (Finnegan's work implicitly challenges Pierre Bourdieu's cruder mapping of the cultural terrain), perhaps because it is (uniquely?) a symbolic practice which is open to contradictory validations. (Frith 1991, pp. 200–1)

Finnegan uses the term musical 'worlds', taken from Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982), to describe the different musical styles she discusses. The term emphasises the fact that each style outlasts the coming and going of the individuals who participate in it; and it embodies 'the differing and complex cultures of ideas and practice' incorporated in each style, the shared social conventions, 'values . . . understandings and practices, modes of conventions and distribution' of those involved, and the 'social organisation of their collective activities' (Finnegan 1989, p. 32). Each world is treated as 'valid in itself, presented at least in part from the viewpoint of its participants', an approach 'necessary for understanding the conventions in these differing worlds in their own terms', and seeing each 'as of equal authenticity with others' (*ibid.*).

Finnegan briefly describes the characteristics of each style, asking 'the same questions of all musics (from classical to punk) and all musicians (from church choirs to heavy metal bands)' (Frith 1991, p. 200). She then discusses contrasts and comparisons between styles in relation to musical learning, creativity, performance, and institutional and organisational support. Consequently, Finnegan challenges 'the usual distinctions of high and low culture' (*ibid.*), depicting rock music, for example, not as a particularly youthful or glamorous commercial activity, but as one particular musical world sharing similar organisation, administrative and musical conventions and constraints with other worlds (classical, folk, jazz, etc.).

Finnegan's comparative approach thus highlights the fact that these are not enclosed worlds but overlapping ones, with shifting boundaries that extend beyond local boundaries in terms of institutions, organisations, ideology, traditions, festivals and publications. This, in addition to the fact that music is a part-time activity for most people, involving varying degrees of individual participation, leads Finnegan to explore alternative terms which might be more appropriate than 'worlds' in describing local music-making. She rejects terms such as 'community', 'interest group' and 'network' in favour of musical 'pathways', which are depicted as a series of known and regular routes that people choose to keep open, maintain, and extend through their activity, hard work and commitment. Some pathways are narrow and individual, others are wider, well-trodden and more familiar. They overlap and intersect, and people leave and return to them. They are only some of the many pathways in people's lives. Hence the metaphor of the pathway places more emphasis upon the flow and flux of behaviour, the practices and processes of music-making.

People choose music as a pathway, suggests Finnegan, because it provides a context for activities and relationships, and a means for the expression of personal and collective identity and value; and because it allows for the meaningful structuring of their actions in time and space. An example of this is the way in which we create time by marking intervals in social life which are framed by music (weddings, Christmas, etc.). Finnegan thus shifts attention away from the more familiar

view of music as a linear progression marked by changes in musical style, to a more cyclical view of time based around life cycle and calendar rituals. In doing so she challenges the familiar but facile assumption that industrial societies are rational, clock-dominated, and less ritualised than non-industrial societies. A comparative approach (whether comparing musical genres, concepts, cultures, or people in relation to the structure of their society) can thus address differences and similarities in the use and interpretation of music (by different individuals, groups, institutions, media, etc.) within a particular society, as well as the ways in which it is conceptualised by different societies (for example, musicianship as something passed on within certain lineages, as something that can be taught, as something that only men do, etc.).

In a study of rock bands in Liverpool (1991a) I too focused upon 'grassroots' music-making and music as social practice and process. I spent a year living in Liverpool getting to know musicians and their social networks, and participating in, and observing, their social activities. The final text reflected an attempt to interpret and introduce a certain way of life, that of a particular type of rock band, to a readership that would be largely unfamiliar with such a culture (a readership that included academics at Oxford University where I was based and whose interest, support and approval I was reliant upon). The text concentrated upon two specific bands. It looked at particular hurdles they confronted in their struggle for success (such as the ideological opposition between creativity and commerce); and at the ways in which various tensions within the bands were dealt with (for instance, through the exclusion of women from the bands' activities).

During more recent research on popular music I have tried to build upon that study, and address some of its weaknesses and absences, by adopting a more historical, comparative and reflexive perspective, and exploring more 'gendered' and 'proactive' research methods. That research continues to study musicians in the context of specific social networks. Following Finnegan, a broad variety of music genres is incorporated, but more emphasis is placed upon their historical dimension, and upon the role of music within households, kinship groups and wider social collectivities defined according to factors such as religion, ethnicity and class. Much of the research involves face-to-face interviews, oral history and archival research, but it is ethnographic in that interviews and materials are contextualised in time and space through observation of relationships and participation in related activities.

One of the main themes of the research is the construction of the concept of locality through music on the part of different individuals, institutions and social collectivities. The resulting representations of local music practices and sounds are compared and contrasted and related to the social, political and economic agendas of those promoting them. The term 'locality' (which, like 'identity', is rather vague and all-encompassing) is used to refer to a sense of community or affinity that is linked to notions of place and to the social construction of spatial boundaries.

The project is perhaps best illustrated through work in progress on Jews in Liverpool. There have been several waves of Jewish immigration to Liverpool, most notably, perhaps, the influx of Jews from Eastern Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The rapid economic, social and geographical mobility of these immigrants after arrival in Liverpool led to shifts: from being Russian or Polish Jews to being Anglo Jews; from notions of a Jewish 'quarter' to notions of a Jewish 'district'; from the split between established and immigrant

Jews to notions of a single Jewish 'community'. Today, conceptualisations of that 'community' tend to be strong, particularly in view of the population's social and economic homogeneity, and its rapidly dwindling numbers.[7] This cohesiveness has come about partly because of the emphasis upon assimilation and social mobility which is characteristic of British Jews generally. It thus reflects a dual concern with being both English and Jewish, the latter drawing loyalties and networks of communication well outside of particular districts and cities.

The shift in the situation, experiences and attitudes of Jews in Liverpool can be examined in the context of the modern entertainment industries in Britain, the beginnings of which coincided with immigration from Eastern Europe and attracted many enterprising immigrants. The access and opportunities offered by popular or 'low' culture helped many Jews to advance economically, but the concern with social advancement transformed the class position of many Jews, and notions of 'community' and Jewishness became more commonly defined through so-called 'high' culture. Biographical details on several Jewish people from Liverpool involved in entertainment illustrate this tension between accessibility and respectability.

The ethnographic research I am conducting on Liverpool Jews today examines their social relationships, activities and networks in relation to this historical context, and focuses upon their concepts of locality. Individuals interviewed have differing degrees of loyalty to, or affinity with, Liverpool; differing conceptualisations of the city; and differing ways of characterising its music, although this is usually done in opposition to the music of other cities such as London and Manchester. These differences reflect contrasts in age, gender and education, and in the type of musical activities the individuals are involved with. At the same time, however, their conflicting experiences clearly have wider resonance in the context of Jews and Jewishness.

Kevin and Simon, for example, are both involved with rock music, the former as a manager, the latter as a producer, performer and songwriter. They come from similar backgrounds, and they are unusual in that these days few Jews living in Liverpool aim for a career in popular music. Both resisted the pressure to join their father's business in order to fulfil this aim, yet both were influenced by family and local Jewish role models in their chosen careers. In addition, both perceive Liverpool and its music as creative *vis-à-vis* other places (especially London). For Kevin that creativity is about an entrepreneurial adventurousness that distinguishes him and his social network in Liverpool from his friends in London who are training to be accountants and are concerned with settling down and with stability. For Simon, that creativity is about a rather more general and defiant assertion of difference, whether that means difference from London and Manchester, or from commercial trends. Hence the two men differ in that Simon opposes creativity with commerce, whilst Kevin links the two.

Kevin seems the least committed to the city and its fortunes, and he is the most educated and travelled of the two, whilst Simon has a wife and child which might make him feel more rooted. In addition, whilst Kevin sees himself as part of a Jewish 'community', and is open about his Jewishness, Simon sees himself as outside that community. He is regarded by Kevin as a mysterious, rather intriguing person who has rejected his Jewishness and 'removed' himself. Simon's depiction of the Liverpool attitude, particularly with regard to music, as a rejection of the

mainstream, doing things in one's own unique way, might thus have some connection with his own personal experiences growing up in Liverpool's Jewish district.

So whilst Kevin presents his involvement with music in a way that seems to complement the social and economic background and concerns of his family and 'community', Simon presents his experiences as being outside them, although he is nevertheless clearly linked to them in various ways (for example, in his romanticisation of Jewish heritage and tradition expressed through his account of his grandfather, and in the way in which he relates what he sees as characteristics of Liverpool's Jewish community – its 'self consciousness' and 'cliqueyness' or isolation for example – to his own personality). At the same time, both identify themselves and their attitudes with Liverpool as a city.

Representations of locality through music by individuals like Kevin and Simon contrast with each other, and further ethnographic study should highlight ways in which each of them might portray locality differently according to different situations involving different sets of people and relationships. Their representations also differ from those promoted by institutions. As far as numerous organisations in Liverpool are concerned, popular music is currently high on the agenda, yet spokespersons for the Jewish 'community' do not seem particularly concerned to represent their community in ways which connect it to popular music (largely for reasons discussed earlier, to do with class and notions of respectability). It would be illuminating to go a stage further and compare and contrast different social or 'ethnic' collectivities in Liverpool and their representative institutions. They are likely to construct the concept of locality through music in different ways, for different reasons, using different sources and channels of access and influence.

Elsewhere (Cohen forthcoming a) I have written about the way in which the so-called Liverpool Sound is being described and discussed by various people living in the city. The discussions highlight the discourses of place and authenticity surrounding the notion of an identifiable Liverpool Sound. These discourses involve a series of oppositions, whereby Liverpool and its music are contrasted with London and Manchester, and distinctions are made with regard to music across the Merseyside region which revolve around issues such as class, religion and ethnicity. The music of Liverpool's North End is contrasted with that of its South End, for example; and music from Black and catholic districts is distinguished from that of white or protestant ones.

Hence through music (including its related sounds, role models, anthems, stereotypes and so on) households, kinship groups and wider sets of relationships act as transmitters of collective representations of nation, city, district, community and family, and of collective conceptualisations of place, home and belonging. Concepts of territoriality, boundaries and relatedness are constructed through interactions between people. The focus should thus be upon individuals and their social relationships and networks, networks that intersect with different 'groups' or 'subcultures' (which, like Finnegan's 'worlds', are obviously not bounded entities), and revolve around collective identities and assertions of difference.

This focus highlights the ways in which such concepts shift and conflict, even amongst a relatively homogenous group, being influenced by factors such as genre and generation,[8] as well as by ethnicity, class and the relations of power involved. Jewish individuals in Liverpool are influenced by different social networks, includ-

ing those of kinship which may be bound up with a history of geographical and social mobility, and with a tension between assimilation and distinctiveness (Englishness and Jewishness). Accordingly, their concepts of locality may reflect transformations in class position, reflecting and addressing relations of power in local, regional, national and international contexts.

Identity should thus be conceived 'not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject' (Clifford 1988, p. 72). Considered ethnographically, identity is relational and conjunctural. A sense of distinctiveness and authenticity is constructed *vis-à-vis* others. Essences exist only as 'a political, cultural invention, a local tactic' (*ibid.*, p. 12). An authentic 'Liverpool Sound', for example, is constructed in terms of a series of oppositions (technological/acoustic, synthesised/raw, contrived/authentic) in which Liverpool is principally opposed to Manchester. Hence meaning does not reside within musical texts, but depends upon the interaction between individuals and texts.

Identity (like locality or tradition) is therefore not a fixed essence to be assembled and possessed, or something influenced by abstract forces or technologies. Rather, identity is always in the process of being achieved, negotiated, invented, symbolised, of becoming, and is itself a source of social change (see Strathern 1992; Clifford 1988, p. 289). The emphasis in cultural and popular music studies upon a macro 'level', and upon concepts such as 'globalisation', 'the West', or 'culture' and 'society', which appear to exist as objective forces of a technological, economic or political nature that somehow act upon individuals and groups, is ethnocentric in that it depends upon a taken-for-granted Western sense of self and society (see Strathern 1992; Clifford 1986, p. 272). Grenier and Gilbault, paraphrasing Martin-Barbero (1988), wrote:

The world political economy is not a force imposed from 'above' upon totally deprived individuals and groups. Rather, it is a complex set of institutions, social relationships, and economic practices that are socially and historically mediated, and that are the subject of multiple differentiated actualisations by individuals and groups within their respective environment. (Grenier and Gilbault 1990, p. 389)

An ethnographic focus upon individuals and social relationships could reveal the processes through which concepts are socially and historically constructed, and thus the cultural specificity of beliefs, values, systems of classification, and concepts of personhood and sociality. This could add an important perspective to the analysis of cultural experience and knowledge, and the ways in which identities are produced and acquired; and it could help in the understanding both of differences between persons and of one's own cultural constructs.[9]

Analysis and description

Ethnographic research can bring the researcher in 'the field' into contact with social reality in a way that no reading of secondary sources or 'armchair theorising' could ever accomplish. Most importantly, therefore, ethnography takes the form of a direct encounter, a shift from strictly theoretical formulations to a domain that is concrete and material. Consequently, it is often used to counter the dangers of formalism or focusing on a purely theoretical level. However, whilst there is pure formalism at one extreme, at the other there is pure description or an interest in experience for its own sake, which should also be avoided. Ethnography is meaningless in the absence of theory, but theoretical models are not simply

imposed on field situations and data; rather, they provide an orientation to the research which can be developed by the researcher over the course of analysing data. This allows one to begin to develop theory in a way that provides much more evidence of the plausibility of different lines of analysis than is available to the armchair theorist or survey researcher. It has been labelled the 'bottom up' approach, in that one moves from the particular to the general (although theory does not somehow arise naturally from the data, but is informed by it).

At the same time, the general is studied within the particular. Concepts such as community, city, world, diaspora and tradition, for example, are not given but are continually negotiated, defined and redefined in the transactions between individuals. The levels of micro and macro, local and global, are dynamically interrelated and inseparable. Detailed interviews with informants and observation of their musical activities and relations is of fundamental importance because, as Geertz has pointed out (1975, p. 17), 'it is through the flow of behaviour . . . that cultural forms find articulation'.

Marcus has discussed further the ways in which ethnography can be 'directed to answering macrosociological questions about the causes of events or the constitution of major systems and processes, usually represented more formally and abstractly in other conceptual languages' (Marcus 1986, p. 167). Grenier and Gilbault (1990, p. 393), on the other hand, have suggested that if popular music studies, with its emphasis upon the 'macro', began to concentrate more upon the 'micro':

researchers may well arrive at new insights on how certain dimensions of a musical phenomenon can actually contribute to its very construction on the international level, and how its meanings and practices differ in each context. In this sense, then, the local and international meanings and practices related to a musical phenomenon would be seen as feeding one another.

The interrelation of theory and description (in itself a theoretical tool) can thus allow for complexity and provide interpretative power. Furthermore, to insist upon the separation of theory from empirical data might be to reproduce that of anthropologist and informant, or to neglect the fact that all theory is historically and culturally situated and ideologically influenced. Researchers who directly and intensely experience another culture can be made aware of their own biases, world views, values, aesthetics, categories and theories, and have them challenged, which can increase self-understanding. In this sense ethnographic research may be far more instructive than pre-formulated questionnaires or interview schedules, or macro-economic 'objective' theories imposed upon a culture and based upon little knowledge of the categories and views of the people concerned.

The presentation and use of ethnography

The increased emphasis (mentioned above) upon reflexivity and the subjective and dialogical nature of the ethnographic process, particularly by postmodern anthropologists,[10] has shifted the focus to the examination of how experience 'in the field' gets transformed into text.[11] Ethnography, in this sense, is not the practice of reflecting, representing or revealing culture, but of translating and writing it. Alongside this, following developments in cultural studies and literary criticism, is the emphasis upon readership: the effect that it has upon writing, and the way in which texts are read and interpreted differently by different people at different

times. Consequently, the authorship of texts has come under scrutiny. Anthropologists have been concerned with ways of representing the authority of their informants: whether to describe them 'as authors, collaborators, assistants, colleagues' (Ellen 1984); and how to experiment with ethnographic writing in ways that could evoke the fragmented, multiple-voiced nature of ethnography.

During research on popular music in Liverpool I have always had to negotiate different ways of presenting myself in 'the field'. Factors such as age, gender, class and ethnicity clearly have implications regarding the situations I experience, involving relations of similarity, but also of difference; equality, but also inequality. Obviously such relations influence the way in which the research is finally textualised. After writing up the research on rock bands, I returned to Liverpool to present the text to the musicians involved, and to ask them whether they wanted to make alterations to it; add their own postscript; or allow me to represent their responses in a postscript. They chose the last option. Since then I have come to appreciate the importance of incorporating alternative perspectives and greater self-reflexivity during the research process and *throughout* the written version of it.

Issues of ethics, accountability and relevance should also be addressed in relation to the uses and implications of the research and research materials. A survey of the music industries on Merseyside, undertaken on behalf of Liverpool City Council, for example (see Cohen 1991b), heightened my awareness of the need to consider the policy implications of research, looking not only at what it could contribute to policy-making processes, but at the ways in which it could potentially be misused by those in positions of power and authority. Policy makers tend to demand quick responses to particular problems; short term solutions rather than deeper understanding; concrete conclusions and recommendations rather than detailed description or theorising. Ethnography may not seem ideally suited to the task but it could contribute much to policy making. By focusing upon individuals, for example, looking at their activities and relationships, and at the ways in which they construct meaning and identity within particular structural constraints, the impact of policy can be properly examined. This should highlight the interaction between people's lived experience and the assumptions of policy makers, and it might emphasise ignorance or short-sightedness on the part of the latter. Ethnography could also be used to undertake case studies from which to draw general proposals; to study the policy makers themselves and the bureaucratic institutions with which they might be involved; and to contribute new perspectives, information and conclusions (through a more thorough process of public consultation, gathering information on individuals and social groups and the relationships between them), which surveys, market research and other forms of statistical analysis might miss.

A growing awareness of the importance of adapting the presentation and use of research on popular music to a range of different needs and abilities led us (at the Institute of Popular Music, Liverpool University) to appoint a Research Coordinator to our current project on popular music in Liverpool who has a background in community relations. Her main role is to encourage us to use the information and materials we are gathering in innovative ways in order to reach a wider audience than most academic research does. We are planning to target general and specific groups (for instance, school pupils, tourists, elderly or blind people), using a variety of different media (exhibitions, radio programmes, tapes, booklets, workshops, reunion and reminiscence events, etc.).

Conclusion

The study of popular music has flourished rapidly within a relatively short period of time. Its further development and impact, however, would be considerably enhanced if it incorporated an ethnographic approach that focused on individuals and their social relationships.

Individuals produce and consume music within specific social contexts (households, neighbourhoods, etc.); at specific times or historical moments; within specific networks of social relationships (involving kin, peers, colleagues, etc.), relationships that have different dimensions (social, political, economic). People's experiences of music, the uses they have for it, and the meanings they construct around, or through it, are bound up with these specificities, and with the interconnections between them. This emphasises the importance of adopting a holistic perspective in the study of music and its role in people's lives, cultures and societies. Practices and discourses need to be examined across a range of intersecting contexts and networks (whether they involve music or not) in order to make sense of the meaning derived from music within one particular setting.

A textual approach can contribute much to such a study, but the importance of social context must be emphasised to make it clear that the meanings derived from a text relate to readings by specific persons, at specific times, within specific places. Whilst a life history approach could add to this, revealing the important ways in which textual interpretations might relate to people's pasts, that diachronic perspective needs to be related to a synchronic view highlighting the range of different activities and relationships that people are involved with at the time of the study, which influence the ways in which musical pasts are constructed within the present.

An ethnographic approach to the study of popular music, involving direct observation of people, their social networks, interactions and discourses, and participation in their day-to-day activities, rituals, rehearsals and performances, would encourage researchers to experience different relationships, views, values and aesthetics, or to view familiar contexts from an alternative perspective. This exercise could increase self-awareness and challenge preconceived notions or 'ungrounded' assumptions. Finnegan's work, for example, questions assumptions about musical practice based upon age and class, and dualities such as high/low culture. Research on kinship, tradition, ethnicity and the politics of locality in relation to rock music in Liverpool complements, and sometimes questions, the common view of that music (and of popular culture in general) as being characterised by rapid change, peer groups and the production and consumption of commodities. It also contrasts with the view of popular music as embodying a condition of placelessness and timelessness (what does it actually mean to say that a particular style or piece of music represents 'a perpetual now', 'an end of history and an end of geography', an 'emphasis on the materiality of surfaces'?).

Hence ethnography would increase our knowledge of the details of popular music processes and practices. Only with such knowledge can we be justified in making more general statements about popular music (e.g. regarding globalisation and its effects, the nature of popular music as mass culture, processes of consumption and production, etc.). More importantly, perhaps, such an approach would remind us that general statements tend to mask the complex interrelateness of contexts, events, activities and relationships involved with popular music. Finne-

gan, for example, shows how hard it is to make generalisations about music in relation to social difference. Similarly, a comparison of the construction of the concept of locality through music by different individuals, institutions and social collectivities in Liverpool highlights its shifting and conflicting nature.

In relation to each other, the identities, values and concepts of Kevin and Simon seem incongruous, cross-cut by issues of age and education. In relation to the so-called Jewish 'community' (and its representative institutions), Kevin and Simon may seem misfits through their involvement with rock music. In relation to other social collectivities in Liverpool, the city's Jewish population may appear to be 'close-knit' and socially and economically homogenous. In relation to Jews in other cities, Liverpool Jews may be depicted as more 'creative'. Yet examined historically, and in relation to the observable networks of relationships with which they are involved and which intersect with the above social and geographical divisions, the values, discourses, and activities of Kevin and Simon can be properly contextualised.

There is some evidence that an ethnographic approach to the study of popular music might be slowly developing. Recently, more attention has been paid to the study of local popular music practices,[12] and a few ethnographies of pop and rock have been, or are being, conducted in Scandinavia,[13] France,[14] Germany,[15] and America,[16] as well as in Britain.[17] What should be particularly encouraged, perhaps, is the dialogue between ethnomusicology and popular music studies. Ethnomusicologists have typically shown concern with non-western musical styles, and with their decline or revival (music in the context of social change), focusing upon small or isolated communities, or upon music in relation to urban migration. More recently, a few ethnomusicologists have turned to the study of more 'popular' (as opposed to 'traditional') or 'commercial' music, and their work should be seen as an important contribution to popular music studies.[18] These developments will hopefully ensure that the study of music as social practice becomes firmly embedded in the future of the discipline.

Endnotes

1 E.g. fieldwork, participant observation, case-study, micro-sociology, interpretive procedure, symbolic interactionism, unstructured interview, life or oral history, network analysis.

2 E.g. as 'archivist', 'translator', 'midwife', 'writer of fiction', 'trickster', 'bricoleur', 'inquisitor', 'intellectual tourist', 'plagiarist', 'ironist' (Geertz 1975; Clifford 1986). Some so-called 'postmodern' anthropologists have broadened the definition of ethnography, conflating it with life history (e.g. Shostak 1983), or seeing it as an explicit and radical form of cultural critique (e.g. Clifford 1988).

3 Grenier and Gilbault's examination of current debates within anthropology focuses upon the key issue of the Other. It 'points out how some of the dimensions of the issue of the Other emphasised in the anthropological debate have been overlooked in popular music studies' (1990, p. 390). They stress the benefits for popular music studies of following anthropology by addressing the Other and the processes of its representation.

4 This despite the recent emphasis in media studies on the different possible readings of a text.

5 Erni (1989) and Silverstone (1990) make similar points in their critiques of audience studies within cultural studies.

6 As Frith points out (1991, p. 200), the 'hidden' in Finnegan's title is meant ironically.

7 The population has declined from 11,000 in 1914, to between 4,000 and 5,000.

8 Particular musical periods and genres obviously give rise to their own specific ideologies, in which place plays a part. Thus rock, unlike pop, may be discussed and authenticated within certain contexts in terms of particular places and roots. This opposition could

also have parallels with the 'world' *versus* 'global' music duality.

9 Within anthropology this focus has highlighted the Western bias of many anthropologists, and questioned their translation of the meanings of other cultures into Western terms and categories.

10 The various, and often valid, criticisms to which postmodernism has been subjected could also be pointed out. That for example, it is: not as innovative as is often claimed (see Caplan 1992, pp. 70–1); often ethnocentric (see Clifford 1988, p. 264; Chen 1989, p. 47); idealistic and utopian (see Ang 1989, p. 28); a-political, especially in its focus upon text and meaning, subjectivity and consumption, rather than upon the relations of production and power surrounding the text and how these might be challenged and changed (see Caplan 1992; Grossberg 1989; Ulin 1991, p. 77; Erni 1989; and Ang 1989, p. 35). It has also been pointed out that feminism anticipated many of the issues now preoccupying postmodernism, but has incorporated the important dimension of power and political action lacking in much postmodernist writing (see Caplan 1992; Strathern 1987; and Hartsock 1990).

11 E.g. the influential collection of essays (*Writing Culture*) edited by Clifford and Marcus (1986) which focus on deconstruction and interpretation of ethnographic texts.

12 This is apparent in proposals for papers to the sixth and seventh IASPM international conferences.

13 E.g. work in progress by H. Jarviluoma on the Finnish folk music movement, and by J. Fornas on rock music and youth culture in Sweden.

14 A. Hennion's ethnographies of recording studios and music conservatories (e.g. 1981).

15 Peter Wicke's project on youth culture in Berlin conducted with his students.

16 There is, of course, the influential work of Becker (1963), and Keil (1966). More recent research on rock bands has been conducted by Bennett (1980); Gay (1991); and Kruse (1993).

17 E.g. White (1983); Finnegan (1989); Cohen (1991).

18 E.g. Waterman (1990); Baily (1981); Stokes (1992); Nettl (1972); Merriam (1964); and Feld (1982).

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