

1 Discourses of Popular Music

A number of discourses dominate the way we think and talk about popular music. They shape how we assess what is good and bad music and what is meaningful and trivial music. They influence the way we think about our own musical tastes and knowledge and lead us to believe that these tell us something about ourselves and in turn that the tastes of others tell us something about them.

It is these discourses that tell us that a boy band does not produce music from the heart, whereas a blues artist does. In fact what we actually mean by such an evaluation means is never clearly articulated. But nevertheless it can lead us to be less forthcoming in expressing our enjoyment of one of their songs and may even prevent us from enjoying it at all. In a discussion about music in a lecture theatre a student who confesses to liking a boy band will most likely be mocked by their classmates. I have seen it happen often. But if it is good pop music why should it matter? We are not laughed at for our tastes in food or because we prefer to take our shower really hot rather than cold. Both these are sensory experiences, as is listening to music. Nor are we evaluated for the kinds of paintings we prefer. We might consider that someone has bad taste but this is different to the way our musical preferences position us. Such notions might sound trivial, but unpicking them to clearly describe the discourses that underpin them provides a valuable resource for the analyses in subsequent chapters.

In this chapter we explore the idea that the meaning of any piece of music is not so much in the sounds themselves but in the discourses we have for understanding them. In other words, we put the meanings there. Frith (1996) has said of music that 'to understand cultural value judgements we must look at the social contexts in which they are made, at the social reasons why some aspects of a sound or spectacle are valued over others' (p. 22). In subsequent chapters of this book we present a set of methods for exploring how artists communicate such cultural value judgements, what we here refer to

as discourses, through look, sounds, voices and lyrics. Here we start to think about what these discourses are.

Authenticity

The discourse of authenticity is at the heart of the way that we think about music and can be seen signified in the different semiotic modes through which artists communicate, through their sound, look, lyrics and what they say in interviews. This idea of authenticity can be illustrated by the different way we evaluate an indie band as compared to a boy band. We might accept that the indie band is authentic but a boy band is certainly not. What is important here is why this is the case and what underlying social values are in operation to bring this evaluation about. Authenticity is something we take for granted but seldom try to define systematically.

To help illustrate the different ways we think about these two kinds of music Cook (1998: 9) gives an example from the *Muppet Show*. There is a scene where one of the puppets plays the part of a classical musician who has the opportunity to play a duet with guest blues guitarist Ry Cooder. The puppet is terrified as he cannot play music without a written score. Ry Cooder gives him a lesson in playing music from the heart, 'letting it come naturally'. In other words, natural music, the blues, is contrasted to music of artifice, classical music. When the puppet does this, letting go and playing naturally, it sounds just like the blues. So the blues is not simply music but natural sounds that come from within. Therefore it is about self-expression as opposed to the structured classical music, which is not. Classical music is part of a literate tradition where music is written down, where there are formal rules as to how it should be played, where institutions school performers as to how this should be done properly. This idea of nature versus artifice underpins much of how we assess music and there is an established range of conventions for it to be communicated. What exactly these are in terms of sounds and performance will be explained in later chapters.

Since the blues is viewed as an authentic expression of an oppressed race – music from the heart – in contrast to the formality of the classical tradition of concert music from Europe, it is considered to be the archetype of music that genuinely expresses true emotion and feeling. In the case of the boy band there is clearly an association of lack of this deeper expression of feeling. To say a boy band produced music from the soul would seem inappropriate.

This idea of authenticity has its origins partly in the Romantic tradition where it was considered that artistic creativity comes from within the soul and is somehow connected to God. Writers such as Goehr (2007), who have written extensively on the history of music and

composition, show how this is connected to the emergence of the notion of individual works of art, of creativity being an individual process rather than something that emerges out of society, out of wider shared cultural practices. Authenticity suggests the opposite, that creativity is individual where there should be an absence of artifice or culture.

This view of the meaning of music emerged in the 19th century. Before this time very different views were held. In 17th-century Europe it was thought that people of certain temperaments would be affected by different kinds of music (Cook, 1998). Lang (1972) cites a theorist from the time who writes: 'martially inclined men are partial to trumpets and drums, and they reject all delicate and pure music' (Kircher, 0000: 544). The idea was that temperaments would respond naturally to particular musical characteristics. In this way music was seen to represent nature itself, into which human character was also tied.

By the 18th century this idea that music represented nature was altered by the idea of 'affects'. Here, due to its connection to the soul, music could convey feelings such as anger, love and pain. This can be heard in opera. Music could speak of the torments and joys of the heart and soul in a way that words could not.

In the 19th century musicologists such as Schenker (1979) argued that music was some higher form of reality entering into our own. This was a view of music that had been around since the time of Pythagoras who had hypothesised that the universe was organised around the same structures as those found in music. The music we hear therefore is the sound of the force of the existence of the universe. Schenker thought music used genius composers as a kind of medium to communicate this higher reality with ordinary people. Music is therefore a window to a different world. During this period, as science was replacing religion as the dominant belief system, music 'provided an alternative route to spiritual consolation' (Cook, 1998: 38). From this lies the logical association with musicianship and ethical qualities, being true to oneself, being sincere – qualities we might group as part of authenticity.

When we assess artists this is often in terms of whether or not they produce music from the heart and whether their performance has some kind of sincerity or whether it is contrived. In the case of a boy band we perceive a look and music designed for specific markets; in other words, something that is produced, contrived, of culture rather than of the soul. We feel, therefore, that there can be no authentic expression either in sounds, looks or lyrics. This means that such acts, however catchy their tunes, however innovative they might in fact be, however finely crafted their songs, will not be taken seriously as evidence of true musical expression. In fact this is odd considering the huge amount of marketing and promotional work that goes into

most acts. Frith (1996) explains that importantly authenticity is not something thought through when people use it and only relates to some kind of sincerity or commitment.

Even music that is clearly predictable can be thought of as being from the heart if it is the right genre. I have sat in blues bars where the musicians looked and sounded like a cliché of blues. Yet from the facial expressions, movements and responses of the punters it was clear that they were witnessing music from the heart and certainly nothing contrived.

One of the reasons that folk music manages to maintain its authenticity, no matter how predictable it might be in terms of sounds, looks and lyrics, is that it is associated with tradition and an older form of social organisation. It is the authentic sound of the past unpolluted by artifice. This is why it is important to play acoustic instruments or 'traditional' instruments. It is a music unspoiled by urban and technological contamination.

Chapman (1996) shows that the idea of folk being an authentic roots music is simply not correct. Much of what is known as 'Celtic' music, for example, has nothing to do with any concrete relationship to any kind of place or time. Nor, he argues, are the instruments traditionally Celtic. This is, he says, is about 'nostalgia for (...) the traditional past, and perhaps a good deal of naivety about the nature of that past' (p. 31). He points out that the idea of a separate Celtic music ignores the fact that if there ever were a Celtic people then they, for as long as we have records, have been involved in mainstream European events. Also the idea of 'traditional' Celtic instruments is equally fictitious. The three-drone bagpipe is a relatively new invention yet it is now internationally accepted as an authentic Celtic sound that speaks of ancient times and people of the land (p. 37).

The musicologist Cook (1986) was interested in the way that we have assumptions about how older forms of music should sound even though we have no recordings of original performances nor accurate transcriptions. For example, we have no idea what medieval music sounded like yet we attend a themed banquet where there are period musicians, and they sound just as we expected (p. 56). Musicologists have demonstrated that we have no real basis on which to make this assumption and that such music may have sounded completely different. Taruskin (1995: 164) states that:

absolutely no one performs pre-twentieth-century music as it would have been performed when new. This may be so easily verified that it is a wonder anyone still believes the contrary.

He gives the example of the music of Beethoven where eyewitness accounts from original performances speak of the way composers would themselves ignore and play around with embellishments and

tempos when performing their own pieces or conducting. Beethoven himself wrote 'Tempo of feeling' on his scores; in other words, 'play as you feel fit'. Taruskin suggests that such issues are now glossed over in performances. He believes that Mozart and Beethoven would listen to contemporary CD recordings of their music with 'utter discomfort and bewilderment' (p. 168). He notes that even early 20th-century recordings of classical pieces sound odd to us now such have ideas of authentic sound been merged with current requirements for how the past sounded.

Goehr (2007) points out that the way we now think about classical works is mistaken. Composers such as Mozart wrote music that they expected to be disassembled and played according to the needs and mood of settings. Often what we now know as individual works were never meant to be so.

I once heard an American colleague who had Welsh ancestors say that when they heard Celtic music, which included bagpipes, for the first time at a Welsh cultural festival they felt that somewhere deep inside they recognised the music, suggesting that the music touched them in a special way as it chimed with their own spiritual connection to the land. Of course this is not to take away the pleasure involved in such imaginings, but it reveals something of the discourses through which we understand sounds and that this influences the way that we hear them. These 'Celtic' sounds not only represent a former time but are literally tied in with the very mists of the ancient lands and peoples we associate with them. Of course the colleague would not have wanted to take the point this far and had made the comment flippantly in a wistful moment over a beer. And I would be the last person to want to take away the pleasure that such a feeling brought to him. But it was based on certain cultural assumptions that allowed him to put these meanings into the sounds and not on anything to be found in the sounds themselves. Cook (1998) concludes that it is the stories we tell about music that help to determine what it is. He puts it thus: 'The values wrapped up in the idea of authenticity, for example, are not simply there in the music; they are there because the way we think about music puts them there' (p. 14).

In subsequent chapters in this book we will be looking at way that artists are able to connote authenticity through certain sounds, looks and lyrics. Authenticity is itself a discourse that can be realised through a range of semiotic resources.

To raise one final point on authenticity, another reason that a boy band is not authentic is that they are not the creators of the music but performers. Performers do not have so much status, unless they establish a status as an original interpreter, such as Billie Holiday. This is slightly different in the case of classical music where certain

virtuoso musicians are considered to be geniuses and in touch with some kind of divine force.

Taruskin (1995) suggests that classical music reveals a particular contradiction in our idea of authenticity. On the one hand, authenticity is about conviction and expression of emotion. But, on the other hand, we also like to think about authentic works. So how does a classical performer remain faithful to the original and convey authenticity through the expression of emotion? Cook (1998) explains that it is odd that such musicians are credited with providing unique interpretations of compositions yet no one ever discusses where the boundaries of interpretation and improvisation meet. Therefore, what interpretation means is never articulated. Yet it becomes a discourse for talking about music and again can be understood as a culturally based way that it has meaning for us.

Body and mind split

I was at a gig enjoying the music of one of my favourite musicians. The audience had all remained seated for most of the performance but during the encores began to leave their seats to dance in the aisles or just to stand where they were and sway and wave their arms about. I didn't have the urge to do this and simply sat watching and listening carefully. After the gig some friends asked if I hadn't enjoyed it, that I didn't appear to get into the music. In fact I had been enraptured. Here we have another discourse about the meaning of music: how it relates to our body and mind and how we can use music to express ourselves. It also shows how people are convinced that there are correct and incorrect ways to express enjoyment of music. Clearly in the case of this gig I had not done so in the right way. I was too busy listening and watching.

For a time I played regular weekly slots in a jazz basement. When I was playing solos audience members would sit smoking and sipping drinks thoughtfully and then clap lightly when I had finished or maybe even just nod a few times or tap the side of their glass with their finger. Occasionally someone might exclaim 'Yes!' as I finished the solo. But there was certainly no raising of arms, leaping around, nor smiling. During the same period I played regular gigs in a blues band. Here people would whoop during solos, shout 'Yeah', would dance in a walking type of motion and occasionally shake their heads as if trying to shake water from their hair. But there would be no leaping around. Earlier in my musical career I performed in orchestras where the audience would sit completely still in silence and then applaud rapturously when they were sure the piece was finished, with of course a few minor ripples, quickly and shyly withdrawn, in some of

the pauses. There were even different facial expressions commonly seen at the different performances. At the blues gig punters would screw up their faces; in the jazz basement you would tend to see furrowed brows, head slightly to one side, suggesting concentration. At the classical concert faces would be open, with the occasional smile.

There are clearly kinds of behaviour appropriate to watching and listening to different kinds of performance and for expressing our appreciation of the music. Frith (1996) has discussed the way we have developed an association of fun with the body and seriousness with the mind. This also helps to explain how what we think of as 'African music' or blues has become associated with the body and movement and classical music has become associated with the soul, intellect and quiet contemplation.

Frith (1996: 124) explains that these associations have their origins in Europe and the US in the 19th century. We must be still and silent during a classical concert or a jazz session as there is something intellectual going on. Serious music needs to be contemplated carefully. But at a rock concert such behaviour is seen as silly, repressed or as missing the point. This is the difference between listening with the mind and listening with the body, which has its origins in the Romantic dichotomy between nature and culture and their corresponding associations with feeling and reason. Feelings were therefore associated with the body as opposed to the intellect. For this reason pop music is often seen as simplistic and not requiring intellect. It is not listened to intellectually but physically.

Frith (1996) argues that it is this association with the body and the natural as opposed to the mind and culture that has allowed pop music to come to be seen as a way of casting off bourgeois inhibitions. The distinction between the body, instinct and feeling as opposed to the mind, intellect and reason sets up the idea that music of the body is free from restriction of the intellect and of high culture. So artists, simply through using certain sounds and visual references that connote this discourse, can indicate that they are of the body, the low brow and not of the bourgeoisie repressed social condition. Of course pop musicians can use this to indicate that they are anti-respectable to give a sense of challenging social convention, when in fact they do nothing of the kind. This is convenient for listeners who can align themselves alongside a spirit of anti-establishment simply by buying and enjoying a particular kind of music.

Black culture and music is generally viewed as the paradigmatic music of the body in opposition to the bourgeoisie intellect. Frith explains this in the context of the Romantic tradition where black people were seen as primitive innocent people, 'uncorrupted by culture, still close to a human "essence"' (p. 127). The argument goes therefore that African music is more sexual and physical since

Africans are more in touch with the body and are associated with unmediated sensual states.

Frith's points help us to understand our earlier example from the *Muppet Show*, where black music is intuitive, instinctive and unmediated sensual expression compared to the formal intellectualisation of classical music. Therefore, the blues itself can free us from the strictures of culture. These points can also help us to understand the difference between the blues and a boy band. The boy band is not an unmediated expression of intuitive feeling as they have been contrived to address a particular audience. Even though the blues band may also have been designed for a market, both by the artists themselves and by a record company, they carry more associations of instinct.

One thing we often take for granted in the context of the body and music is that rhythm and beat are somehow some kind of rhythm of the body, a pulse or heart beat. Frith (1996) suggests that there is something odd about this. He asks why beat is never compared to machines, to clockwork and therefore why these kinds of rhythms are never thought to affect us in this primitive way (p. 133). As with authenticity this kind of discourse is not clearly thought through and appears simply as a natural way to think about music. Using a machine to talk about an effect on the body appears as contrary to the idea of the soul, the spirit and expression from the heart, and to the romantic notion that music connects us to some higher plane. Of course rap music is able to use the sound of the drum machine to a different effect. But rap, of course, has a number of other important indicators of authenticity. We will be analysing these in later chapters.

As well as being the paradigmatic case of authentic, unmediated music of the body, African or black music is often distinguished in terms of the centrality of beat. But a number of writers have challenged the very idea of an 'African' or 'black' music being one category of music at all. Negus (1996) suggests that the very idea of African music is absurd. Africa is the largest of all continents with massive genetic, cultural and linguistic variation that is more distinct than across the whole of Europe and between some European and African areas. Yet it is common to call music 'African' or 'black'. Gilroy (1994) has discussed the oddness of this particular role given to black and African music. He describes this as the 'place prepared for black cultural expression in the hierarchy of creativity generated by the pernicious metaphysical dualism that identifies blacks with the body and whites with the mind' (p. 97).

The question is to what extent can we indeed find any evidence for this 'bodyness' in black music? I personally have heard white musicians saying that they could only ever copy a black musician, but never really play like them, unless they were themselves black, meaning of course that black people are more in touch with a bodily

kind of expression. Such white musicians would consider this as a non-racist statement, as showing respect and reverence for black musicians. But is there evidence for these things in black music?

Tagg (1989) has argued that all of the features often ascribed to black music – i.e. African-American music – can be shown to be characteristic of much music played by people around the world and through history. For example, the blue notes that give blues its sound can be found in most European folk music. Further, he argues, that what is generally referred to as European music in contrast to African-American music is highly selective and elitist. Tagg concludes that there are no intrinsic musical styles that are essential to black music.

Negus (1996) explains that there are hundreds of European musical traditions, many of which contain all the ingredients often attributed to black music – blue notes, syncopation and improvisation (p. 104). But this is the kind of music that black people have been allowed, or encouraged to do, which has then become what they do produce. Artists such as Scott Joplin had their operas ignored while their ragtime was celebrated. Also the technical aspects of what we think of as black music tend to be ignored. Kofsky (1970) points out, for example, that the jazz of Charlie Parker was highly technical yet is mainly associated with feeling. Much of John Coltrane's saxophone soloing is highly mathematical and of incredibly high technical rigour. Yet this is not talked about in this way but rather in terms of its spirituality. One result of all this according to Gilroy (1994) is that black people can end up using this kind of romantic reference to define themselves. The problem, he suggests, is when it is treated as essentialist, black identity is treated as unchanging, monolithic, a kind of ethnic absolutism. What being black is can be constructed through these categories even though this lumps together massive racial and cultural variations.

Hutnyk (2000) has commented on the way that this essentialist view of black identity has been a central feature and of its commodification. What we think of as black music works through a racialisation that has been a central part of the marketing of this music to both Euro-American audiences and to black audiences themselves. In agreement with Gilroy, he suggests that this has also served as a means of 'presenting identities for self confirmation and internalisation to black communities themselves' (p. 20). This racialisation leads to a perception that music can simply represent monolithic ethnic groups, where black musicians represent music from the body. At music festivals such as Womad, he points out, African and Caribbean musicians offer multicultural music based on ethnic marketing categories.

From this discussion about authenticity and the body notions of musical affect we can begin to see why we talk about music in terms

of the way it says something of our character, why we feel that music comes from a realm other than culture, that it is associated with the soul, and that it is connected to nature, and why it can allow us to challenge bourgeois culture. Of course we rarely find such discourses articulated directly, nor do we find people struggling with the contradictions between them. Taruskin (1995) suggests that these kinds of discourses have become the 'moral slang' of our age. In other words, we use them to give meaning to our experiences though they are by no means concrete terms.

How we talk about music

In the introduction I suggested that just as when the linguist analyses grammar and patterns in the use of language in literature and poetry that this takes nothing away from the pleasures that they can bring so there is no reason to suggest that a semiotics of music takes anything away from the way it affects us. However, there is an argument that when we listen to music for leisure we do not attend to the same features and qualities as we do when we approach it for purposes of analysis. It is akin to analysing a fine painting in terms of the kinds of brushstrokes and use of perspective. This is not how most of us enjoy such works and not why they move us. But there is a problem with this view of listening as it implies that there is a way to do it neutrally and completely unmotivated. Again here we see the influence of Romanticism where it is assumed that there is a kind of listening where we simply connect spiritually or bodily with the music. But how we talk about the way that music affects is a valuable resource that can give us further access to the discourses we have for understanding it.

Frith (1996) gives much thought to what we actually think listening to music is since this can tell us something about what we believe music to be. The music reviews we find in the music press are one source of such views. Here is an example of how critics write in a BBC review of an album by Willie Nelson and Wynton Marsalis called 'Two Men with the Blues':

Nelson's vocals on Stardust are a touch brighter than Hoagy Carmichael may have intended but the effect is leavened by a smokey, gently twisting trumpet line full of yearning beauty courtesy of Marsalis. Another Nelson standard, Georgia On My Mind, has a sweet, subdued but compelling intimacy and could legitimately lay claim to the title of ultimate standout track on an album of standout tracks. (www.bbc.co.uk/music/release/3brg/)

We find a number of terms to describe the trumpet sound: 'smokey', 'twisting' and 'yearning'. Frith says that such descriptions may indeed appear as elegant ways of describing the work of a musician. But in

other ways he feels they say more about pop history and culture and what we have come to believe of music (1996: 68). These are clues to what we think music is and how it should affect us. If we were to comment to a friend about a boy band song heard casually on a radio playing in a café that we thought the trumpet was 'smokey' and 'yearning' they would think we were mad. And indeed in reviews for the records of boy bands such things are never mentioned. 'Smokey' here conveys something of the jazz basement and 'yearning' of bodily feelings. Such terms are not fitting for the music of a boy band. Reviews for John Coltrane records say little about his technical abilities and the arrangements but much about the 'soulfulness', 'longing' and spiritual journey of his music. Clearly the adjectives chosen, as Frith suggests, speak not so much about the music but about pop history and discourses of music. In fact boy bands are often assessed in terms of which other artists they sound like, or, if it is a second album, whether they can be taken seriously as musicians, whether they can mature.

Some have argued that since music can only ever connote and never denote it is impossible to describe. Ethnomusicologists such as Charles Seeger (1977) have questioned the degree that words can express musical experiences. Roland Barthes (1977) made the point that music in language is 'only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective' (p. 291). But these comments suggest that there might possibly be a neutral language for describing music or that somehow there are affects that are free of the discourses we have for talking about them. As Frith suggests, these provide clues as to what we think music is.

So what is music? For Cook (1990) it is not possible to answer this question in terms of anything to do with sounds themselves. Some theorists such as Hanslick (1957) have argued that music can be distinguished from nine musical sounds as they involve the use of fixed pitches, where as all naturally occurring sounds generally do not. For Cook (1990) this creates problems. Much music does not involve fixed pitches, such as Japanese *shakuhachi* music. Morse code has fixed pitches but we wouldn't call that music. We might hear workers on a nearby building site bashing out melodies accidentally as they hit metal and saw wood. For Cook:

it is not possible to arrive at a satisfactory definition of music simply in terms of sound (...) because of the essential role that the listener, and more generally the environment in which the sound is heard, plays in the constitution of any event as a musical one. (p. 11)

Cook gives the example of John Cage's 4' 33" for piano. This is an entirely silent piece. A pianist arrives on stage, opens the keyboard and sits motionless for the duration of the piece. What happens is that people in the audience become hugely aware of the sounds

around them. Cage's point was that anything can be heard as music. He went on to compose silent pieces to be performed in all sorts of contexts. For Cook this shows that composing music is not so much about making musically interesting or appropriate sounds as it is of creating contexts in which those sounds will be perceived as musically interesting (p. 12). We can argue that this is what pop musicians partly do. They work to make contexts (image, look) that help to make the sounds they make relevant and more interesting to people. Making them relevant and interesting, as we have already shown, may mean creating the right conditions for listeners to put meanings into the music. So the right look, sound quality or lyric, the right behaviour off stage, helps the listener to realise particular discourses, such as authenticity, for example.

We can do courses in musical appreciation, read books, or read critics in the music press, that teach us to link what we hear in the music to biographical facts about the composer and historical information about the musical style. Jazz lovers may know lots about a performer and their music and particular narratives will become established about these performers. But this is not the case for all kinds of music. Only authentic artists, or those who exhibit genius, are to be discussed in terms of biography and influences.

There is also a resistance to being told by experts about what we should listen to in music or how we should listen. We feel we have the right to have our own emotional responses to music. Cook (1998) points out that in concert notes about classical music or about jazz musicians at a performance we may have no idea about what is described in terms of things like 'large scale tonal structures' or 'modal blues'. But we enjoy the music nevertheless and may wish to vehemently point this out. It feels rather like being told exactly how to enjoy other sensory experiences such as taking a hot shower or eating our favourite meal. But as we have seen throughout this chapter both what experts say about music and the very fact that listeners claim to have a natural way of listening free of technical knowledge both offer evidence of the way that culture shapes what we think music is shaping our listening and participation.

The fact that there are experts in music and that enjoying some kinds of music is believed to be enhanced by expert knowledge does have another effect: it drives a high-low culture distinction. Some have the power to define what is good music and what is trivial or no more than simple entertainment. This expertise and authority of aesthetic sanction brings power. We see this at the level of musicology, rock criticism and even where a group of dedicated indie fans, as in Hibbett's (2004) case, pride themselves in having knowledge about musical tradition and origins, therefore excluding those who are not real fans. Frith (1996) has thought about this in terms of the

way that we can establish a sense of identity and difference through this process of displaying the ability to discriminate good, bad and important music (p. 18). He draws on Bourdieu to argue that

the aesthetic interpretation of high art is, in fact, functional: it enables aesthetes to display their social superiority. (p. 18)

So the very fact that we pride ourselves on recognising talent and good music is part of perpetuating such distinctions. The audience at the jazz basement who said 'yes' at the end of a saxophone solo are displaying their aesthetic appreciation and therefore alignment with jazz heritage. So to understand any kind of value judgement made about music we must look first at the social contexts in which we find them made. Then we must ask why a kind of music, a sound, a look, a particular of performance is valued over others. This process means looking at the way that the kinds of discourses we have been looking at in this chapter are used as taken-for-granted measures of what music is. But, crucially for the purposes of this book, it means that we can establish and inventories the way that certain kinds of sounds, words and arrangements become associated with notions like talent and creativity and others not.

Music reflects subcultures

A further way that we talk about music is through its association with 'subcultures'. We often hear people talk of things like 'indie culture' or the 'indie scene'. In Cardiff where I live there is a music venue which attracts a range of genres of acts. When there is a gig queues stretch out along the street. It is a simple matter to identify the genre of music by clothing, haircuts and poses. We have already dealt with the way that being a fan of a particular music can bring a sense of expertise or can indicate our alignment with authenticity and anti-bourgeois sentiments. But why the need to dress the same? Can we indeed think about these groups of genre fans as a kind of subculture or scene?

I have a friend whose highlight of the year is the folk music festival Womad, from where she usually returns with a range of 'ethnic' music and jewellery. This friend is marginally active in Amnesty International and is always proud to take part in peace and anti-war demonstrations. When she last returned from Womad she showed photographs of herself with a fire-juggler, of her participating in 'African' dancing, eating exotic foods, and sitting listening to indigenous 'Latin American' poetry. These things form a familiar collection of cultural practices and artefacts. When I have been to this friend's house for dinner I have met more of her friends with whom she attends festivals who share the same set of interests and aesthetic

pleasures. But to what extent do they form some kind of identifiable culture? It is clear, for example, that we will not tend to get the African dancing, juggling and ethnic jewellery at an indie or rap gig.

At the end of the 1970s Dick Hebdige, in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, discussed what he called 'style' in order to explain the way that subcultures combined elements to communicate a way of life. He gave the example of punk music that used visuals of torn clothes, swastikas, spiky brightly-dyed hair and swearing to point to their dissatisfaction with society. Of course punks had no coherent criticism of society, nor did they offer any solutions, but they were able to show their disillusionment through how they looked and spoke, and also through the distortion and directness of their music. I recently saw a photograph of a colleague in his punk gear in 1980. On his jacket was written the word 'destroy'. This was about indicating a lack of alignment with consensus culture rather than with physical destruction itself.

Hebdige thought that punk was basically about challenging the mainstream culture done through appropriation of things from that culture. All this came from working-class young men who, disillusioned with much in their lives, found alternative ways to create meaning. In the case of punk and other subgroups, such as the mods and rockers of the 1960s, their existence could be seen to be as a response to specific circumstances. And given our discussion of the way that music can be an authentic expression of the soul and also indicate certain individual dispositions, it is not surprising that people might see it as being part of the core of their identity.

Clarke (1990), however, was critical of this view of an active subculture challenging a passive mainstream. Many people who became punks were not part of any hardcore subcultures but simply had a particular haircut, wore a few of the clothes for a while, or liked some of the music. The colleague in the photograph, for example, went to university, became an academic and has shares in public services that were sold off in the 1980s. But when he had his spiky hair and carried the words 'destroy' and 'anarchy' on his jacket he felt good through his disrespect and difference.

Thornton (1995) thought it useful to think about such subcultures using Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital. Here young people use subcultural capital as a way of distinguishing themselves from others. For young teenagers there might be important cultural capital in wearing a particular kind of clothing for a while, or being able to connote the values of being anti-mainstream. So music and clothes can be seen as markers of distinction and status. Of course this can involve an extremely conformist seeking of acceptance and status, realised in the first place though acts of consumption. The

question can be posed therefore as to how can this be any challenge to the mainstream?

Laing (1985) was critical of the view that subcultures of this kind did ever really offer any kind of challenge. After all, the kinds of punk bands discussed by Hebdige made a fortune in sales, becoming mainstream themselves. The friend who goes to Womad considers herself as against the mainstream. Yet she lives in a large 19th-century house in an opulent area of town, owns several other properties which she rents out and likes expensive furniture. We could argue, using Chaney's (1996) account of lifestyle society that music cultures can be taken on in the same way that we take on other signifiers of lifestyle identity in consumer society such as the car we drive, the furniture we put in our house or the newspaper we read. Being into indie music or Womad's world music could be thought about as lifestyle choices. This is not to say that when we listen to this music that it will not affect us emotionally, but that the meanings are part of the lifestyles that we construct.

Kruse (1993) suggests rather that we use distinctions like 'mainstream' and 'alternative music' in order to differentiate ourselves from an imagined other. After all, she reminds us, 'Senses of shared identity are alliances formed out of oppositional stances' (p. 34).

For Thornton (1995) the very idea of a mainstream is itself problematic. It is often something proposed by people in order to authenticate their own likes and styles. What we call subcultures cannot be understood independently from the role of the media and commercial interests. This is all the more the case when we think about the signifiers of subcultures in terms of lifestyle society where we are able to indicate the kinds of person we are through consumer choices (Chaney, 1996). Negus (1996) makes the observation that much of what we think about as rebelliousness in pop music cultures is in fact pretty harmless. As we considered earlier, much of the challenge produced by pop music can be due to the way it is able to signify a rejection of bourgeoisie intellectual culture. In later chapters we will be looking at how this rebelliousness is connoted in sounds, looks and lyrics.

Negus (1996) asks a further interesting question about the nature of subcultures. What happens when they become internationalised, when we see punk in Tokyo, or a rap act in Turkey? A search on the Web reveals that many countries around the world have rap artists, who follow a very similar iconography and sing similar kinds of 'protest' songs. All wear very similar clothing and strike the same poses on their promotional material. Is it productive to think about this as a subculture or music scene? Negus asks whether what we are seeing involves simply imitation and commercial exploitations (p. 24). Again this brings us back to the idea of lifestyle. Challenges to the

social order through music genre such as rap are not systematically argued nor carried out but are connoted through aligning oneself alongside an unformulated idea of rebellion though striking certain poses, wearing clothes and making or listening to particular kinds of sounds. Rap is able to connote an authenticity of inner-city oppression, and also of macho aggression and pride, all realised closely to consumerism.

Creativity versus the music corporation

While the following chapters in this book will be looking specifically at how bands use semiotic resources – sounds, image and word – to communicate about themselves, it is important that we are mindful of the way that record companies are also active in this process, taking an important role in shaping the image of artists, in seeking market position and addressing audiences. Negus, writing in the mid-1990s, points out:

Since the beginning of the 1990s, six major recording companies have controlled the means by which approximately 80 to 85 per cent of recordings sold in the world are produced, manufactured and distributed. These companies are Sony Music Entertainment, Electrical and Musical Industries (EMI), the Music Corporation of America (MCA), Polygram Music Entertainment, the Bertelsmann Music Group (BMG) and Warner Music International. (1996: 51)

Musical and visual language of music comes to our attention generally through large corporations. Even bands which are sold as 'edgy', 'indie', or 'anti-mainstream', have often been carefully marketed as such. In this book we will not be dealing with marketing or record companies (see Middleton, 1984, 1990). But there are a number of discourses about the role of corporations and the way that they are seen to interfere with and be opposed to creativity that are important to how we evaluate bands themselves that relate to music's or artists' authenticity, creativity and social relevance. These crop up in the discourse connoted by the semiotic resources used by bands.

Stemming from Adorno (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979) many commentators have discussed standardisation in the music industry, where large corporations treat music like any other goods in order to maximise profits (Chapple and Garofalo, 1977). This can mean that even if an artist wishes to use their music to challenge capitalism or wider society this will become watered down through the way it is processed by corporations (Harker, 1980; George, 1988). Other writers (e.g., Negus, 1991) have pointed to a number of problems with

such views. It is not so much that corporations have no effects at all on music but that this view involves a romanticisation and simplification of their relationship to creativity.

From what has been discussed throughout this chapter it is clear that commercial activity sits in conflict with our idea of the creative artist who communicates something of the soul through their god-given raw talent. The big record companies are interested in profit maximisation. There is in principle, therefore, a difference of interest. Artists might be manipulated by their record label, become seduced by monetary gain and therefore 'sell out'. Worst of all, some bands become the product of a label, deliberately designed and marketed to appeal to particular listeners. We can accept that some artists do become very rich, and this is permitted so long as it is a reward for talent and not as an end in itself.

In the romantic tradition we also tend to resist the idea that creativity can be a large-scale collective act. We can see this, to step outside of the field of music for a moment, in the way movies can be thought of as art only where they are the product of a single director. In art house cinemas it is the movies of single-named directors that are shown and celebrated. Such movies sit more easily with our idea of authorship than studio-produced movies where huge production teams collaborate to make blockbusters. This is even where such works produce incredible cinematic experiences. In such cases we even seek out to name individual talents who make particular contributions, but not think of the whole as art. There is a similar thing happening in music where it is not acceptable that a musician, or at least our experience of them, could be improved by the involvement of the music industry itself. It should be the artists who design their own sound, look and image. Musicians who, we feel, have become too processed are thought to have sold out and lost their artistic integrity in order to sell records. But this will be judged through discourses of authenticity and not through any actual concrete facts.

There is also the idea that independent labels break new and exciting bands that would have been excluded by the majors, that the indie labels are much more able to provide room for true creativity. Negus (1992) believes that there is some evidence that such labels have made significant contributions but that such companies also have financial concerns as priority (p. 43). Therefore they have an investment in the same system. In a similar vein, Lee (1995), after researching independent labels, concluded that they still operate in the same capitalist system as the majors and that while they may make music for niche groups they do not provide any challenge to the nature of the market itself. He suggests that as they become more successful they are likely to move away from any sense of challenging the system. For Negus (1992) we should not make the

mistake of seeing indies and majors as some kind of opposition. They are connected by 'complex patterns of ownership, investment, licensing, formal and informal and sometimes deliberately obscured relationships' (1991: 18).

Frith (1983) suggests that the best way to think about such labels is as talent spotters, reminding us that many are often arms of majors. Being on an indie label can bring extra kudos, which is important in the way that artists need to be seen to be authentic. For example, Blur were on the Food Label which was part of Parlophone records, which in turn was part of EMI. But this allowed them, for some of their fans, to be an 'indie' band.

But Frith (1987) makes a more important point. He argues that what we know of as pop music, even that which we have thought of most creative as most anti-mainstream, has come to exist not in spite of commerce, but in harmony with it. It was the music industry, the commercialisation of music, that allowed pop to happen in the first place. Pop music as we know it is not something that is apart from the process of the commercialisation of music, of it becoming an industry. Rock and roll did not emerge from outside of the system of capitalist production but is a product of the fusing of creativity and commerce.

For record corporations a new sound, or creativity, is part of the way they can make money. On the one hand, this important for what the public wants. But on the other, Negus observes, while record companies must be profitable their acts are also assessed in terms of creativity by DJs, journalists, fans etc., which means that to some extent they must attend to these things. Of course this means that commercial decisions, such as which bands to promote, can be about a commercial/creative set of predictions, meaning that at a certain time particular kinds of music might be preferred by record companies. But this can mean that at one time it is a new kind of sound that they are promoting. For Negus (1996) it is important to remember that what becomes commercially successful is not about the market deciding, yet nor is it a matter of the public getting what it wants (p. 50).

Much music, of course, gets made outside of the controls of record companies. We can see gigs in a local pub, create our own music on sound-editing software on our own computers and busk on street corners. But does this really mean that this music is beyond the influence of the big labels? After all, Negus (1996) argues, record labels have been powerful in defining what the cannons are, what we get to listen to more broadly, how artists sound, play and look, and the attitudes that they should have. When I played saxophone in blues bands the punters knew what we should sound like as they had heard blues on records, on the radio, all distributed by corporations.

In this chapter we have begun to look at the discourses that shape the way that we think about popular music. In the following chapters the aim is to provide a toolkit for analysing the way these discourses are realised through the designs of record sleeves, promotional photography, music videos, lyrics and the music itself. In later chapters we therefore explore how artists are able to help listeners put meanings into their music.

- 1 Look at a list of chart music or musicians listed as nominated at an awards ceremony. Rate them in terms of authenticity and explain your choices in the context of what we have discussed in this chapter.
- 2 Access around six reviews of different genres of records. There is an abundance of these on the Web. Consider the following issues:
 - What kinds of things in the music do the reviewers describe?
 - What do they tell us about how we should listen to music?
 - What makes good and bad music?
 - What kinds of adjectives are used to describe the sounds?
 - Is there a difference in which bands are described in terms of their musical influences?
 - Use your answers to these questions to say what kinds of discourses dominate about music.
- 3 Interview people who have different musical tastes. Ask them to talk about a particular song that they like. Note what kinds of discourses they use to talk about the music:
 - How do they use the music to talk about themselves and others?
 - Do they use a sense of the mainstream and counter-culture?
 - How do they talk about the way that music affects them?
 - How do they think music affects people who listen to mainstream music?

Activity