

## *Popular Music*

### Interview with Simon Frith – Reflections on the Mercury Music Prize

In 2016, Simon Frith stepped down as chair of the Mercury Music Prize (MMP), a post he had held for the 25 years since the Prize was founded in 1992. During this time, the MMP – awarded to the British and Irish album of the year - became an established part of the UK music industry's annual cycle, helping to shape musical taste and business practice. Its credibility as a prize also made it the one that musicians wanted to win. While he was chair, Simon Frith wrote *Performing Rites* (1996), a book that analysed, among other things, the value attributed to music and the processes by which that value is determined. The MMP could be seen as a practical example of the ideas and arguments of the book. The Editorial Group of *Popular Music* invited Simon Frith to reflect on his time as chair of the MMP and on the link between this role and his academic interests. The interview was conducted by John Street. The conversation began with a question about the interests behind the MMP over its 25-year history.

*Simon Frith:* The Mercury Prize was a marketing initiative of the music industry, through the British Phonographic Industry (BPI); it was a way of selling records. The BPI understood that if such a prize was going to work, it had to be seen as independent of the industry itself. Although record companies would fund the prize by paying money to enter records and buying tables at the show, the prize itself had to be funded by somebody else.

The first thing the industry did, therefore, was approach an events specialist, David Wilkinson, to form a company to run the prize. His first task was to get a sponsor, Mercury Communication, and until last year the prize was funded by a sponsor. It was independent of the BPI in the sense that the BPI had no financial responsibility for it, although, obviously, if record companies didn't collaborate it wouldn't happen.

Over the years, sponsors changed. We always managed to find new ones to replace sponsors coming to an end of their contract, although it was also always a bit of a strain—not for me, I had nothing to do with this, but for the prize company.

Arts sponsorship an interesting issue for academic discussion. When the prize started, it was about branding. Companies wanted their brand to be associated with something with clear cultural value. Barclaycard, our last sponsor, had a different model. They were interested in the Mercury in the context of a broader attempt to get into the live ticketing market. The problem they had with Mercury was that it's not a live music prize; it's a record prize. The only live music concert involved is the award show, on the night the Prize is announced. In the end, then, it made better sense for Barclaycard to enter the live music market directly and they dropped their Mercury sponsorship after the 2014 prize. As usual at that stage Mercury employed a sponsorship-getter but it couldn't find anyone; the old branding model was in decline - in lots of areas, not just for the Mercury.

We considered continuing the prize, as an online project, which would not cost much. And it also seemed that the most obvious new partner to involve would be the BBC. The BBC was not uninterested, but there would have been a gap of two years between prizes because of the way BBC decisions are made. Our feeling was that if there's a gap for a year, you lose whatever reputation you've got.

In the end, it was the BPI that stepped in to make sure the prize survived; not a very surprising decision given that the prize was set up in the BPI's interest in the first place. But this does mean that the BPI now owns the prize; there is no longer an independent prize company. Because the prize still needs to be seen as independent, to maintain its credibility, I was asked to stay on as chair, at least for a couple of years, which I did.

The prize still needs sponsorship, it still costs quite a lot of money to run, and the record industry wasn't necessarily interested in giving it financial support indefinitely. The first BPI year (2015) was unsponsored, though the BBC was a significant partner, especially in the way it was publicised. Since then Hyundai has been on board, though I have no idea what their sponsorship involves. I doubt they sponsor the whole thing and the prize is now run by the BPI itself.

*John Street:* What's interesting, I suppose, in thinking about the way that Mercury operates, and how it tries to marry up its competing interests, is the role that you as

a chair have had to play in that. What did you learn, in those early days, about how your role was being defined?

The way I would imagine it, you're, on the one hand, trying to manage judges to produce some kind of decision. On the other, you're very conscious of these other interests, who are not strictly in the room but who have a presence there, the various organisations from the record industry, or the record companies, the broadcasters, the musicians, and others. How did you come to define your role, or understand your role?

*SF*: I think I was originally approached to chair the judges because I was known within the BPI as someone who had shown a reasonable understanding of the industry in what I'd written as a journalist. And because I was an academic, I was not seen as having any direct interest in any likely entry—it was difficult for the industry to find people who didn't have any financial interest in a record that might win the prize. I'm also pretty sure that when I was first approached the intention was that I would be chair for the first year and someone new would do it each year afterwards (on the model of Booker Prize for fiction, the original inspiration for the Mercury).

Otherwise, because it was so new, there hadn't really been much thought about how the judging process was going to work. My first discussions with David Wilkinson and his then partner Robert Chandler were therefore about its logistics—how would we get to a longlist, a shortlist, a winner. By coincidence, Jon Savage and I had had an idea for an annual album prize that we'd put to the *Observer* and not got anywhere. So I had thought a bit about how such a prize would work and one thing of which I was convinced, even at that early stage, was that judging meetings should involve discussion, not voting. We needed a system whereby while getting the shortlist would obviously need a kind of voting, it could be what we might call manipulated voting. David Wilkinson had worked with the Tate, on the Turner Prize [for art], and had a very strong sense of Nicholas Serota [then Director of the Tate] being effectively in charge of what actually happened at

judges' meetings. He saw the chair role as being quite active in producing what was needed.

In that first year I just thought about the nuts and bolts of the judging meetings but as they worked well, and I got on well with David and he understood what I was trying to do, it just came to be taken for granted that I would be permanent chair. Once that was assumed, I started being involved in other discussions about how the prize could be developed. That's when it became clear that we had all these different interests involved. Again, we were feeling our way but realised we needed to keep the record industry happy, the artists happy, the sponsors happy, and so forth.

Quite early on, one of my PhD students did some research on the Mercury's press coverage that showed very clearly the significance of a TV show. The press tend to comment on something because it's going to be on TV, rather than anything else. So we needed a TV show, and we needed to think about television producers and schedulers, and how to keep them happy. So we became aware of all these different players too.

That, in turn, meant that I also came to understand that, in the end, in relation to my job as a chair of this sort of prize, it doesn't really matter who wins or who is on the shortlist. What matters is that the prize keeps going, so you need to have a shortlist and a winner that will enable everything else, to ensure that everybody who is involved in supporting it will go on supporting it. That can be contradictory because different people will support it for different reasons. It also means you have to take a long-term view.

We realised, for example, that if an indie rock record were to win every year the eventual result would be that no one would enter the Mercury except indie rock bands, which would be okay but a different sort of prize. So quite early on I had this sense of a broad constituency that had to be kept happy. When I was first appointed, I didn't think of this at all. I was much more interested in the actual judging process.

*JS:* Just to take up that thought about the judging process, and the idea that you preferred deliberation over voting and so forth. Looking back over the 25 years, do you think that each of those juries ended up working with roughly the same criteria? Although they may have been made up of different people, although some stayed on for more than one year, did they always, in the process of the deliberation, end up with roughly the same set of criteria in order to make the judgement? Or was each jury unique in its own way, in how it decided what was going to be on the shortlist, or win?

*SF:* Well, from very early on, we had a policy that we wouldn't replace the jury every year. That was partly because if you have judging meetings based on discussion, people have to learn how to discuss. Many of the people on our jury were not necessarily good at discussing, so they'd be quite nervous, and not particularly contribute to discussion in their first year. It would be silly to then say, "That's it." Judges got much better as they went on!

So we developed a policy of partial replacement. Some people stayed on for a very long time. I think only one person ever decided they didn't want a second go. Some people couldn't because they had a record in [contention], or whatever it was. So there was always some sort of continuity, as well as some sort of difference. Each jury was different, but each always had a core of people who knew how it worked.

I don't think there were shared criteria of what was a good or bad record exactly. I think there were shared criteria of what was a winner of a Mercury Prize as a result of discussion. In other words, my goal was that when we came to decide who had won, even the people who really didn't want it to win would think, "Given everything that's happened, that was a fair decision." I don't think that ever didn't happen, whatever people might say in retrospect.

*JS:* When you were talking about how some people found it more difficult to talk about music, or to make the judgements, or to express what they thought, were there categories into which those people fell?

*SF:* Yes. Because I wanted a discussion, essentially what the judging meetings were about—even if they changed a bit over the years--the shortlist meeting was

about people making a case as to why a record should be on the shortlist, while the final meeting also involved people making a case as to why something should come off the list.

Shortlist meetings therefore tended to be very positive, although people might say negative things. Someone who is a very articulate debater can really have an effect, although sometimes someone might make a wonderful speech and have no effect. The best single argument for a record to be on the shortlist I ever heard was for a record (by Mogwai) that wasn't eventually on the shortlist though everybody in the room, certainly, went away and listened to it again.

Journalists are not necessarily good at speaking about music; they're good at writing about it. It varies a lot but quite a lot of journalists are quite shy at speaking; they're not necessarily very articulate. They usually did the homework and had strong thoughts, but they were not necessarily very good at arguing.

Radio people, by contrast, were used to committees, and tended therefore to speak well. On the other hand, they were rather bad at listening! The sort of radio people we had tended to be quite senior. They were people who made programming decisions, told people what to play. So, they were a different problem than journalists. They were good at arguing but had to learn to discuss.

Other people, the musicians, varied greatly. Some are very noisy and some were very quiet. I'm trying to think what other sort of people we had. Broadcasters were all pretty well the same. Essentially we've had journalists, broadcasters broadly defined, and musicians. Obviously, some broadcasters who are presenters rather than producers know how to be engaging. Lauren Laverne was an excellent judge in that she could always make everyone laugh whatever the circumstances.

*JS:* When you had musicians on, like Anne Dudley and people like that, would they argue in different terms to the ways in which a journalist or a broadcaster would?

*SF:* Yes. Journalists tended to be more like I would be. They were much more what you might call sociological. They were concerned to think about the cultural value

of a piece of music, how it compared with other pieces of music, where it stood in the great history of popular music.

Musicians of all sorts, although in different ways depending if they were film scorers, session musicians or stars, tended to be much more focused on the music in itself. They would pick up on things that might not be something I would particularly notice or care about; they would be concerned with technical or analytic issues.

Radio and TV people tended to be much more interested in a record's audience, in who might like it and why, why it was significant for listeners and why it had an impact.

All this meant that from an academic point of view chairing meetings was fascinating because you saw quite different approaches to music having to make sense of each other.

*JS:* One of the things you refer to in your Live Music Exchange blog [<http://livemusicexchange.org/blog/reflections-on-the-mercury-prize-simon-frith/>] about your experience on the Mercury is the status of the album, as the object of discussion, and its role as an art product that people value. Did people talk about what Dai Griffiths calls the 'album-ness' of the records? In other words, how they worked as 10 or 12 tracks, whatever it was? Did that feature in the discussion? Has that notion of what the album is changed over those 25 year so that what would have been thought to be a good album in '92 might be different in 2016?

*SF:* I think that for all judges, even though there was continuity, there was always a question, which particularly came up at the choice of the winner, an anxiety to know what, actually, we were looking for. I had to address this at the final meeting, for which David would also provide the judges with briefing notes. These did change over the years, according to what was on the shortlist and our own understanding of what would be a good winner.

We were consistent in saying that the album of the year should clearly be British or Irish in its sensibility because that was part of the point of the prize, to celebrate British and Irish music. We occasionally had problems with that. The case that was most discussed in the press was Antony and the Johnsons' *I Am A Bird Now*, which was made in America with American musicians but, for us, was clearly an expression of a very British sensibility.

Second, the chosen album had to be of its time. In other words, the record of the year in 1987 had to say something about 1987. This made it difficult for albums to win that were clearly retro in certain ways. I guess, the obvious album that didn't win, for which this might have been a consideration was Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black*.

Third, the winner had to be distinctive – that's a much more subjective thing, but to win, an album had to have some quality that made it stand out from everything else.

And, to go back to your question, a winning album did have to have 'albumness'. This issue came up in two ways that were interesting because they were different. In the early days dance music albums were often said to be not very 'albumy'. The ones that did get on [to the shortlist] were albums that had some sort of programme or set sensibility. This also affected views of pop albums if they were essentially collections of singles. By the time Mercury started we were in the post-rock period. Judges did assume that an album had to have some sort of coherence; it had to work as 'an album'.

You would therefore get people saying that an entry would have been much better if the track listing had been reordered. When the prize started we were still thinking in these pre-digital vinyl ways.

The other genre that was problematic from this album-ness point of view was classical music. At the beginning we always had quite a few classical entries and we always had a classical album on the shortlist. But, on the whole, classical composers do not write albums and many classical albums (particularly when the selling point is the performer) combine the new work that made them eligible with



an old work. John Tavener's *Protecting Veil* album, for example, also featured Steven Isserlis playing Britten's Cello Suite No.3, which we carefully ignored!

And even classical albums that do feature only works by a contemporary composer tend to put together pieces composed over the previous decade. Such an album is not necessarily coherent in the rock way. So it was often difficult to agree on a classical title that really fitted the album-ness criterion. Then record companies' classical music divisions decided that the Mercury was of little promotional value (even for classical records on the shortlist), so they stopped entering anything except records with possible crossover appeal.

As an academic, I do find the concept of album-ness interesting because I believe, and record industry people confirm this, that despite the so-called digital revolution, the album is still seen as art object of choice by young musicians across all genres, including jazz and folk. I was recently in conversation at an event at Newcastle University with Tim Brinkhurst, manager of Young Fathers when they won the Mercury Prize in 2014 for *Dead*. He described the pressure on young bands from track-focused music services like Spotify to stop thinking of music making in terms of albums. Young Fathers saw this a real threat to their artistic integrity.

*JS*: I suppose that thought, perhaps, takes us back to the question about the other interests that are present in the room when the judging is going on. I know Apple Music is now involved in some way with the Mercury, in some guise at least.

*SF*: It gives us our iPods with all the music on. Last year we had to send them back again (laughs).

*JS*: When you get feedback, or get a sense of how the industry has responded to what the committee decided, the jury decided, how do they express that? What sense do you get of whether you've, in their terms, done a good job or a less good job? Do broadcasters express very different kinds of views to record companies?

*SF*: Let's take record companies first. Record companies, on the whole, think the prize is a good thing because of its origins as a way of marketing music that otherwise might be difficult to market. There is no doubt that, over the years,

they've thought of certain records as being prime Mercury shortlist material, and have even altered their release dates in order to make sure they make the maximum impact at the time that records are entered.

Individual record companies are, undoubtedly, pissed off if they don't have records on the list but, by and large, they accept that, it's the way the prize works, nothing is guaranteed. Also, musicians absolutely love the prize. Their record companies respect that; they see the prize servicing their musicians in that sense.

On the other hand, the record industry as a whole does expect the prize to create a sales buzz generally, if not for their own particular titles. I guess the only time we were particularly criticised within the industry was when Speech Debelle won with *Speech Therapy* in 2009 and, for various unfortunate reasons, created no buzz at all and fell out with her record company. Because that year the prize didn't seem to generate much attention for any of the other records either there was a general feeling that it hadn't done what it was supposed to do. The problem was not so much that Speech Debelle won, but that the whole thing didn't work right that year in promotional terms.

By contrast, when Benjamin Clementine won with *At Least For Now* in 2015 (the first year after the BPI took over) although he was an obscure artist with an album which hadn't previously done particularly well in the UK, his Parisian connections [JS: the terrorist attack on the Bataclan concert venue and elsewhere in Paris had happened not long before the award show and the power of his TV performance generated very good publicity, so the industry couldn't really complain about that at all.

Last year [2016], of course, the BPI was over the moon because they'd been criticised so much for ignoring grime at the Brits. Having two grime artists on the Mercury shortlist, Kano and Skepta, and a grime album as the winner, Skepta's *Konnichiwa*, suited them completely, even though by then Skepta had very little to do with any record company.

Indie labels have always liked us because we do give them a promotional buzz that they wouldn't get (or be able to afford) otherwise. It would perhaps be an issue if

over, say, a three year period there was a significant label that had not any of their releases on the shortlist. So backstage, as it were, we did tend to have a little think about record labels (though this was never discussed at judges' meetings). We were aware of our duty of care towards the record companies supporting us.

Broadcasters (we've mostly dealt with the BBC) are rather different and were more of a problem for us. The whole point of the Mercury award ceremony is to showcase 12 rather different sorts of music. In the earliest days the show wasn't televised and when we realised we needed TV and the BBC got interested there was still a feeling in the BBC that this was a prize which in its musical eclecticism and combination of commercial and artistic drivers reflected the values of, first of all, BBC 2 and then BBC 4, though in programming terms the Mercury's most natural BBC fit has always been Radio 6, which is very supportive, and sees us as having the same sort of aesthetic as they have.

Television producers and schedulers, meanwhile, are now convinced that no one will watch anything on TV that they don't like. There is therefore no way they can put on a music show that has, say, a jazz act in it, because the audience will switch off. Over the years the BBC thus became increasingly concerned that the Mercury shortlist should feature people who would, in its view, get an audience and increasingly unwilling to broadcast programmes featuring lots of different music. It became a battle every year to get the BBC to do any sort of Mercury show on TV, and we began to fall foul of the BBC's obsession with a particular kind of audience engagement.

Hence last year's foolish decision to have, in effect, two shortlists. The initial shortlist of 12 was chosen by the judges as usual, but listeners then voted for which one of these should be on a second shortlist of 6 (the judges voting for the other 5 —without discussion). On the show night all nominees performed as usual, and then the final 6 were announced, and these 6 featured in a second show, the one broadcast by the BBC. This was the BBC's condition for supporting the show at all, I guess (it certainly undermined the way the judging process usually worked), and the BPI went along with it cheerily enough only to face the wrath of artists and their record companies on the night—what was meant to be a celebration in which the naming of the winner can be, in a sense, incidental became a source of

resentment from all those people excluded from the final show. This is a good example of the contradictory interests involved in the prize. I doubt this system will be repeated this year (the BPI's record company members won't allow it), but the contradiction between the BBC's and the record industry's view of the prize will still need to be resolved somehow.

*JS:* Has the experience of being on the Mercury, and watching people make the decisions you saw being made, changed what you think about judgement and discrimination in music?

*SF:* It clarified my argument that you can't talk about value judgements out of the context of their function. They take place differently in different circumstances. It also made me realise that musical taste can't be considered as just an individual subjective thing. It's not quite as simple as that.

One of the things our discussions brought out was that while everybody was aware of their subjective taste, and may well have expressed their arguments in subjective terms, they were also aware that this wasn't a very effective way of getting other people to agree with them. They had to justify their taste'; they had to bring in general criteria to account for what they individually felt. David Hume would have understood what was going on!

This did have interesting effects on how judging arguments worked. Sometimes, for example, the most significant intervention (the one that changed people's minds) was when someone whom none of the other judges would have dreamt would have liked a particular record, suddenly argued passionately for it. It had a stronger effect when somebody who was very clearly seen as being on one side in an aesthetic debate suddenly switched to the other side.

Another thing that fascinated me was that if you were to come to a shortlist meeting and listen to what everybody said and then, at the end of that meeting, were asked to predict who would emerge as winner from the final meeting, you would almost certainly get it wrong. I think the only winner I could have predicted after a shortlist

meeting would have been Arctic Monkeys' *Whatever People Say I Am That's What I'm Not* in 2006. Shortlist discussions primarily involved people expressing their taste and then agreeing on a list that balanced the resulting taste differences fairly, as it were.

Things changed between the shortlisting and the selection of the winner. To begin with, people went on listening and they changed their minds, or they changed their passions. And because the shortlisting was such a positive meeting we hadn't heard previously the reasons why an album might not be a good winner. At the shortlist meeting you might have 100% of people saying, "Yes, that must go on the longlist," then at the final meeting my first question was: "Who is going to speak for this record to win?" and there might be total silence because although everybody liked it nobody thought of it as the record of the year.

I also got a sense of how people's tastes change. One of the problems for the prize was that because it covers releases over 12 months, you can be comparing records you've listened to for a year with records you're hearing for the first time. Journalists, in particular, are more likely to be engaged with an album they've only just got. They feel over-familiar with something that's a year old. One of the things I had to do, as chair, was to control for this effect.

*JS:* In the process you were describing there, particularly that period between the shortlist and the final choice, do you get a sense that the judges' identities shift from an 'I' to a 'we'? In other words, their judicial view is, in a sense, a product of their conversations with other people rather than being simply them as individuals articulating their own taste?

*SF:* I don't think, at that stage, it's exactly the product of their conversation with other people, but it is an effect of thinking they're going to have to have a conversation with other people. If the shortlist meetings were primarily people expressing their tastes, the final meetings involved having to justify or explain them. That's why I didn't want a formal voting process, because if you had that you'd just go in and say, "How many people vote for this, how many people vote for

that?" Whereas Mercury judges knew they're going to have to persuade other people to lay their tastes aside. People did change their minds in mid-argument; it could be quite funny.

In terms of democratic process, almost always, when we came to the end of the final discussion, we did have to have an indicative vote because there were still people disagreeing and it was impossible to work out 'the mood of the meeting'.

My ideal situation was to get down to three contenders by discussion (rather than to two) and then to give people a vote on each pair in turn. I'd present judges with the three different pairs, and ask: "If it was a choice between these two which would you vote for?" The winner then almost always became completely clear. People were always amazed. They would look at the voting figures and couldn't believe their clarity! They showed an agreement on who should win that wasn't at all obvious from the continuing arguments. That's why there was usually consensus about the winning album when it was announced—it helped that the judges couldn't quite see how it had happened.

*JS:* Which is how electoral systems work too. Do you think, then, that scholars of popular music ought to spend more time considering these sorts of institutional arrangements, or this kind of process? Would they learn more if they were to spend more time thinking about the Mercury, and other similar kinds of prizes?

*SF:* I think they would learn two completely different sorts of things. They would learn how people form their musical tastes and how that works in terms of social relations, individual judgements, conservatism, conformity, etc.

And, of course, in Mercury panel discussions there were obvious differences in the discussion of a new artist, of whom no one has previously heard, and the discussion of a Van Morrison making his 27th album. Musical genres were also talked about differently. Last year, for example, it was absolutely clear that talking about David Bowie was completely different from talking about Skepta.

This is the common sense of popular music studies but I found it enlightening to see these different discourses in action. Also, from a more sociological perspective,

listening to the judges made me realise that music professionals still, despite everything, have significance as gatekeepers and tastemakers. I don't know how I could have studied that other than by having the job that I had.

Secondly, if I hadn't been part of the Mercury team, I wouldn't have realised that the record industry has changed much less dramatically than is usually assumed. I would have swallowed the line about albums no longer being significant and record companies being in trouble. That was not the conclusion I drew from my Mercury experience, which gave me a sense rather of things happening, of people—and record companies--putting out more and more music in many different ways.

I guess all popular music academics should listen to the amount of music I had to every year. Certainly, if you do listen to all the music that is coming out, you do get a different sense of what is happening than you get from just following the trends.

There is, indeed, an astonishing amount of music out there, of all genres. I think jazz is in the healthiest state in Britain it's ever been. I think folk is pretty healthy. I also believe that genre labels only work for record companies' marketing departments and for nobody else at all. Certainly one of the Mercury effects is that we have tended to like records that were not easily generically placed. The most enjoyable part of the shows was watching quite different sorts of musicians making musical plans together.

I never ceased to be amazed at British musicians' complete confidence that they had the ability—and the right--to make music of whatever sort they chose. From a Mercury shortlisting point of view this was most exciting when new or young people were involved. But there were also every year whole strands of record that never ever got onto a shortlist, and that few people know about, records made by people who have been making music, successfully or unsuccessfully, for 30 years or more and who still enter each one of their albums. I thought that was admirable, and a neglected aspect of popular music culture, even if I rarely liked any of the resulting music. And occasionally something does come through to the shortlist and you think, "That's amazing, why had I never heard of this person?" Somebody like Richard Hawley. I wouldn't have listened to him without Mercury.

JS: Do you think the Mercury will still be around 25 years from now?

SF: That's a difficult question. I am being replaced by Tony Wadsworth, who used to be the head of EMI (and chair of the BPI) but who is now retired. He is, from the BPI point of view, a safe pair of hands, but he was also known, by me and many other people, as one of the nice people in the music business. I don't know how he will chair meetings but he has always understood what the prize is for and how it should work.

And I suspect that the BPI, however they might fiddle with the prize, know that, whatever else it is, the Mercury can't be seen to be anything like The Brits.

So, institutionally things are in place for Mercury's survival, and I'm pretty sure that people will go on making albums, much as they do now. That's not going to change. What might well change, though, is media interest. The Prize's most likely problem, going forward, will be the relationship with the BBC (and its consequences for publicity, sponsorship, etc.). The pressure to make the Mercury more like the Brits is going to come from the BBC rather than the BPI.

That said, what most matters is that record companies go on putting out albums. If they do, I can't see any good reason why the prize shouldn't survive.

JS: We're speaking almost exactly 50 years to the day after the release of *Sgt Pepper*. Would it have won if there'd been a Mercury Prize in 1967?

SF: We often discussed that at judges' meetings. Not so much *Sgt Pepper*, but what would it have been like to be on a Mercury panel in '66, '67, and '68, when all those classic records came out. I suspect that *Sgt Pepper* might not have won, but I would have to see what other records came out that year.

For example, an album like the Incredible String Band's *The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion* might well have won, because, in Mercury terms, it was so interesting generically. With *Sgt Pepper*, even at the time critical opinion wasn't



unanimously positive. And then if they'd already won with *Revolver* ... So I can't answer that question. It certainly wouldn't have *necessarily* won.

Of course, when records first come out one doesn't know what their historical significance will be. When I look back now over the 25 years of Mercury and read some of the shortlists I think, "Why was that there? I've never thought about that record since." But I still think that all the decisions about winners were right.

Even the famous "M People beats Blur" year [1994], which still makes aging *NME* types cross, goes on making sense to me in terms of what was happening to British musical culture at the time—music historians will learn rather more about that from *Elegant Slumming* than from *Parklife*.

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