

# contact

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Question: What's an account of a sociologists' jamboree doing in this journal of 'today's music'? Answer: The inclusion of music as one of the topics under discussion at the conference, the overall theme of which was 'Culture', as well as the presence of a group of musicians who were invited to take part in a workshop on 'The Sociology of Music': John Shepherd (who led the group), Graham Vulliamy and Trevor Wishart (three co-authors of *Whose Music?*)<sup>1</sup> and myself (as the author of another book on the same subject).<sup>2</sup> Dick Witts was also expected but, alas! did not arrive.

Fine: it is always good to see a professional association trying to let in some air and widen its perspective. But what exactly was meant by 'Culture'? At no time did I encounter any real attempt to define the word, which has been described by Raymond Williams as 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language', and by default, as it were, a definition seemed to emerge which looked very like 'Culture is what people do when they're not earning a living'. That this seemingly unexamined assumption should persist is a pity, since it perpetuates the very divisions of our lives and thus of our culture so deplored by Marx (and Marxists were well in evidence at Brighton) and later thinkers; to find that sociologists, who of all people should be questioning such distinctions, are continuing to separate some activities off as 'cultural' is disappointing. What goes on on the factory floor or in the office, while driving a car or doing the shopping, are all part of the culture and should be considered as such. In fact it could be argued that the term 'sociology of culture' is in itself a tautology, since if sociology is not about culture, what the hell *is* it about? I pause for no reply, since I am aware that as a musician I was a very naive observer and that there are no doubt subtleties that escape me, and accept, under protest, the definition. But even within that definition, the balance of topics was curious: many papers on literature, TV and film (that these particular media should be special growth areas of interest among sociologists may have something to do with their clearly definable verbal content which facilitates verbal discussion: unlike, say, music), a little on theatre, something on music, *nothing* on dance (whose explosive growth in the last few years is surely a matter for remark), sport (what about skateboarding?) or any other of many 'cultural' activities. Against this there were papers of admirable breadth, such as 'Popular Culture', 'Cultural Imperialism' and 'Working Class Ideologies' (I amused myself when bored by counting the occurrences of the word 'hegemony' and its barbarous adjectival derivative: 1978's sociological in-word).

I cannot but mention, also as naive observer, other apparently unexamined assumptions underlying much of the discussion, against which one might expect that the training and discipline of sociologists might have put them on guard. The assumption that art is a *thing*, a commodity as it were, rather than an activity, something people *do*, pervaded and bedevilled much of the discussion; one heard the phrase 'production and consumption of art' frequently, as if art and, say, cars were subject to essentially the same social processes and economic laws. The two are *not* the same (I am not here claiming any neo-Arnoldian 'sacred' status for Art); the purpose of making a car is to have a car, while the primary purpose of painting a picture is to paint, and the finished picture is in a sense a by-product. It must be said clearly and often: art is an activity performed within society, and what we call its techniques are simply the ways in which that activity is carried out. Once this simple fact is grasped, many of the difficulties facing the sociologist about whether he should remain 'aesthetically neutral' (yuk!) or study 'high' or 'popular' art, 'good' or 'bad' art and so forth simply cease to exist, and all art and artistic technique become perfectly accessible to study within the social context. Not all, I know, will agree with me; but again, one would have hoped that a sociologist considering art from any viewpoint, Marxist or conservative, liberal or anarchist, would perceive that there is an issue here. I could find no awareness that it so much as existed.

Also strange to me was the absence of any reference to the experience of cultures other than our own; nowhere did I hear voiced the idea that there might be something to be learned on the important questions facing our society from the experience of Chinese, or Africans, or Eskimos, for example. All questions were considered, so far as I heard, exclusively within the context of the modern industrial West. Significant here too is the word 'modern'; I was equally surprised by the lack of historical perspective in much of the discussion: the historical background of rock music, to take just one example. A sociologist might reply that his study was sociology, not social anthropology or history. Fair enough, but it could be that sociology's answers (and even its questions, without which there can be no good answers) are the poorer for it. The spectacle of eager young graduates announcing age-old human concerns as if they had just invented them, or describing, without apparent embarrassment, the failure of a piece of research, the absurdity of whose premises should have been patent after five minutes' application of common sense without positivistic blinkers, or describing 'in-depth' interviews with posh art dealers whose self-assessment is accepted without question or the mildest critical assessment: all these are not without their funny side, but might give ground for concern to senior members of the profession.

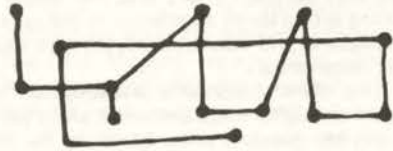
It was the largest such affair that I have ever attended: some 600 participants, I was told, and 70 sessions over the four days. It was clearly impossible to attend everything; there were at peak times as many as eight sessions going on together, and the uninitiated had to find his way through them as best he could. This necessitated some painful choices: did one go to hear John Berger on 'Images and Words', for example, or do one's duty to one's art and go to 'Rock and Sexuality'? (I did my duty.) Music was not strongly represented, apart from the workshop on 'The Sociology of Music' there were only two sessions on rock and an account by Michael Robinson of the sociological factors behind the decline of British music between 1750 and 1800. I missed the latter in favour of 'Popular Culture', since one of the contributors, Robert Colls, was the author of that excellent book *The Collier's Rant: song and culture in the industrial village*,<sup>3</sup> but was disappointed in that music was scarcely mentioned: though much of the discussion was of interest.

Of the two papers on rock, the first, 'Rock and Theories of Mass Communication' was more problematical. One of the two speakers, Dave Laing, gave a brief account of the ways in which the study of rock has so far been approached.<sup>4</sup> Hayakawa's analysis of the content of lyrics, Willis's and others' study of its audience, Adorno's attempt at a comprehensive theory in terms of the late development of capitalism — and rightly dismissed them as incomplete (but where was Greil Marcus? or Carl Belz? or even Tony Palmer?). But Phil Hardy's subsequent attempt to place rock simply as part of the post-war growth of the leisure industry seemed so hopelessly inadequate that I began to wonder if I was missing the point, until later discussion over tea reassured me. It is a commonplace that record companies are in business to make money, but to propose such a bromide as a comprehensive account of such an important musical phenomenon is to fall into economic determinism of the crudest kind, and to ignore all the features that make it interesting to the musician and the student of society alike. The account of the packaging and marketing of Kate Bush was not without its grisly fascination, but left entirely out of account the fact that the young lady is clearly an artist of promise (to put it no higher) and gave no hint as to why her music takes the form it does, or why people seem to like it. My own experience confirms the point later made from the floor: I heard her voice and her song and liked it long before I ever knew who the hell Kate Bush was, or learnt of the massive publicity campaign which sought to create her an image.

Angie McRobbie and Simon Frith on 'Rock and Sexuality' took a rounder view of rock, acknowledging the contradiction that, on the one hand, it is highly sexist both in its music and lyrics and in its business organisation, and on the other that through its sheer energy and drive it can be a liberating force from the rigid sexual controls of our society, for male and female alike. The speakers characterised two main, though overlapping, streams of rock (while ignoring, as did the previous speakers, the difficult question of a definition of rock — it seemed to me that there was some



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confusion there): 'cockrock', with hard driving beat, aimed at male concepts of their own sexuality as dominant, aggressive and collective; and teenybop, aimed at girls and emphasising female passivity and isolation. In both cases the making of the music is almost entirely a male-dominated activity and nowhere is there any point of identification for girls in successful performers. Angie McRobbie pointed out that the magazine *Jackie*, aimed at teenage girls, presents music to them in such a way as to exclude them from any part in the creative process; it contains no record reviews or help in developing critical awareness, no advice on breaking into the industry, no help in learning to play an instrument: only 'romance', as the girls are intended to gaze at the centrefold photo of the latest teen idol (male of course), read cosmeticised accounts of his private life and follow the fashions. All true enough; it is clear that rock, like any other music, is not an autonomous form growing and developing according to its own inner laws alone, but is a social phenomenon, influenced profoundly if not crucially by social forms, by other media, by money (of course) and by concepts of individual identity and especially sexuality: and in turn shaping the listener's perception of these matters. But still unconsidered is the nature of the music itself, and the questions why it sounds as it does and how the musicians make the music. Paul Willis's homology, pooh-poohed by Dave Laing, drawn between the long flowing lines of hippy hair and the melodic lines of West Coast rock, is, despite its over-simplicity and musical naivety, at least an attempt to consider the music itself. The fact that in our society today music is packaged and sold like any other capitalist commodity should not blind us to the essential nature of the creative activity we call music.

These considerations hung in the air around the workshop which, although I discuss it last, was actually the first session of the conference. (Had it been later in the weekend, I for one might have had a clearer idea of how sociologists approach their subject: at one stage I was obliged to admit that I didn't know what sociology was, which raised an (unintentional) laugh since, as I found out later, it is a sociologists' in-joke that *no-one knows*.) My recollection of the discussion among the 20 or so people present is less than total. I remember that there was much attention given to notation, in which a useful distinction was arrived at between two functions: the first, as used mainly by vernacular musicians, mnemonic, a reminder of music already made in sound, and treated only as rough guide and springboard for the musical performance (as Billie Holiday, for example, used the musical texts of popular songs); and the second, the actual medium through which composition takes place, controlling the performance as completely as possible and forming an image of the music as performed. The relation between the nature of the notation and of the music it notates was explored.

There was also a recurrent argument as to whether the music itself could be made the subject of sociological study at all, or only the circumstances of its production and consumption; one member of the group, who admitted having read neither of the two books on which discussion was purportedly based, took us to task for not having studied music's production and consumption. There are, of course, a number of excellent studies of this, that of Paul Henry Lang, for example, and the two books of Henry Raynor, but the trouble is that they stop short just at the point where the matter begins to be really interesting: at the social meaning of the act of making music and of the ways in which it is made. (Trevor Wishart threw out the challenging idea that Bach's Mass in B minor could be regarded as a social treatise, but there were no takers.) With hindsight, I realise that the discussion was hampered once again by the persistent concept of music as a thing rather than as an activity. From this point to the sexism of rock in general, and Abba in particular, seems a long stride, but it seems we took it. I do remember replying to someone who asserted that rock was 'mind-destroying rubbish' by suggesting that it might be possible to view the great classics today, even the great Bach and Beethoven, as mind-destroying rubbish through the use to which the music is put. Again the idea was greeted with blank incredulity and merely provoked an accusation from the floor that I was a Marxist (I must get around to reading Marx to find out why).

The final, plenary, session on 'The State, Culture and Patronage' produced some ideas of interest. There were

four platform speakers, the first being Nicholas Garnham, Head of Media Studies at the Polytechnic of Central London, who made the following points:

- (1) State patronage currently operates on unquestioned assumptions concerning the nature of art and of 'cultural production'; institutions like the Arts Council are inevitably conservative simply because they assume the nature of art to be 'given' and their own function as simply to fill the gap left by the decline of private patronage.
- (2) The Arts Council works on the idea of art as a commodity and assumes that it is beneficial to make this commodity available to as wide a section of society as possible. This inevitably affects the nature of its patronage and of the art it causes to be made.
- (3) This idea fails to take account of the class-relatedness of the very concept of art, and the failure of the Arts Council to 'bring art' to large segments of the population is related to the failure of the education system to assist precisely those same segments.
- (4) The Arts Council's assumption mentioned in (1) ignores the difference between state patronage and that of the private patron, who, because he has only himself to please, places a strongly personal imprint on the work done under his patronage. The impersonal nature of a committee working under the unexamined assumptions of (1) and (2) produces a very different kind of patronage, and thus a very different kind of art.

The second speaker, Peter Brinson of the Gulbenkian Foundation, suggested that the Gulbenkian is in fact more like a private patron, in that it is not accountable to anyone in the way it spends its money — a seemingly paltry £¾ million compared to the Arts Council's £49 million, but by no means negligible, since once one subtracts from the latter sum such annually committed expenses as Covent Garden and the National Theatre there is not so very much more left to dispense on an ad hoc basis than the Gulbenkian has (it seems that nobody felt the need to question the massive subsidising of these institutions, the dinosaurs of the present-day artistic scene). Money had in fact been given by the Gulbenkian Foundation for the present conference, and although Mr Brinson was emphatic that he had had no say in its planning, he did have some comments to make on its organisation which are worth recording:

- (1) Its definition of culture was one-sided, favouring some cultural activities at the expense of others (he mentioned dance as one neglected art-form).
- (2) There was a huge gap between theory and practice of the arts: not enough practising artists had been present who might have rooted theoretical discussion firmly in artistic practice (I might add that I felt not enough use was made of those who *did* attend). With our culture in its present state of crisis, sociologists need artists no less than artists need sociologists (rather more, I could not help thinking).
- (3) There had been much discussion of theoretical problems of sociology, but not enough attention paid to the problems of workers on the ground: the nature of Arts Council funding, for example, or the issues raised by the recent cutting-off by a Conservative local authority 'somewhere in the North' of the subsidy granted by their predecessors to a leftist theatre group. He pointed out that an important function of the old patronage had been the protection of artists from ideological control. Artists today are much more vulnerable to the attentions of ideological pressure groups than formerly, a matter to which sociologists might devote some attention.

He was followed by Sue Beardon, Administrator of the feminist theatre group The Monstrous Regiment, who described her dealings with the Arts Council in obtaining a subsidy: the labyrinthine channels through which one had to pass, and above all its obsession with 'standards' and the difficulty of finding out what it meant by this, or even of engaging in discussion on it. Alan Fountain, Film Officer of the East Midlands Arts Association, who spoke last, pointed out that bodies like the Arts Council were, however, by no means monolithic but contained within them wide divergences of opinion. He advised artists and groups working outside establishment concepts of art to try to engage in a dialogue with funding institutions, to seek out people within the institutions who might be sympathetic, and work to change them. In the open session that followed, the old chestnut was raised of whether the radical artist (in this case, a theatre group) was compromising himself by



accepting funds from the Arts Council, Gulbenkian, or indeed any other establishment body. The questioner was put neatly in his place by Sue Beardon, but the larger question of the advisability of subsidies for the arts at all was again left untouched. Graham Vulliamy commented on the Gulbenkian report on the training of musicians and drew attention to the notable omission from it of any reference to the problems encountered by popular musicians, but had his guns spiked by Peter Brinson, who admitted comfortably that this was a serious weakness of the report (it was clearly not the first time he had had to face this criticism) but one over which the Foundation, as mere sponsor, had had no control. End of discussion: a pity, I thought, since it might have given rise to what would have been the only discussion at this conference of the social stratification of music in our society. With discussion running otherwise along predictable lines, I made an excuse and left.

The issue of *New Society* in the week following the conference described it as an 'anti-capitalist field day (with disco)'. I missed the disco, but can see what the writer meant. He also says: 'All too often in British sociology the individual — who has choices, interests and an intelligence — vanishes. She or he becomes the pulp of some sub-Adorno interpretation of the world as wholly manipulative. . . . If sociology itself could let a little more air into its closed room — and let a concern for individuals in too — it might hang together more.' It seemed to me that in this conference the BSA was in fact attempting to let in a little air, but that so far the aperture was very small and the room large and still inclined to be stuffy. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Who's afraid of sociologists? Not me: not any more.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>John Shepherd, Phil Virden, Graham Vulliamy and Trevor Wishart, *Whose Music? A Sociology of Musical Languages* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1977). This will be reviewed in the next issue of *Contact*. (Ed.)

<sup>2</sup>Christopher Small, *Music-Society-Education* (London: John Calder, 'Platform Books' series, 1977). This book is now also available in paperback. For a review see *Contact* 18 (Winter 1977-78), pp.34-36. (Ed.)