

# Introduction

How does one tell the history of an art form? Looking at classic examples like Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (London, Phaidon Press, 1950) or Read's *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1959), it seems that, at their core, such projects conventionally consist of annotated lists: extended commentaries on a long line of works and artists, in other words a canon. These works are typically presented as peaks of the aesthetic power of the art form in question, as ultimate manifestations of aesthetic perfection, complexity of form and depth of expression which humans are capable of reaching through this art form. Such presentations hide an implicit promise that, with proper knowledge, encounters with these works will result in extraordinary experiences.

When understood in this way, and applying core ideas from the sociology of religion to the sphere of art (as Bourdieu does in his studies of art), it becomes clear that canons – as objects of worship, as foci of rituals of valorisation (and even pilgrimage) – comprise a realm of sacredness within fields of art and in the cultural field in general. The works and the authors that comprise the canon are supposedly the undisputed 'masterpieces' and 'geniuses' of the art form. As such, they might also be components of the general canon of Culture, of the dominant cultural capital. Being accepted into the canon is thus the ultimate prize an art work or an author can achieve. Sacredness, in other words, is inseparable from power: major struggles within a given art field are about the consecration of works into the canon. However, because of the great emphasis on innovation, and the variety of expressive formats in modernity, full agreement as to the criteria for valorising and consecrating art works does not really exist. Thus the core struggles within fields of art are in fact about the power to consecrate, about the power to define and impose the dominant and legitimate criteria of evaluation.

Canonisation in the case of popular music has gone hand in hand with its very recognition as a legitimate art form. Such recognition came into being through 1960s and 1970s Anglo-American pop-rock music. That is, the struggle of rock music's production of meaning apparatus – critics, journalists, radio and television music editors, musicians, media and cultural industry professionals, and fans – for recognition and legitimacy was also a struggle for imposition of its criteria of evaluation on the whole field of popular music. Consequently, Anglo-American pop-rock music became the major ingredient in the canon of popular music. Names such as the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, Steve Wonder (to name the most obvious), have been consecrated as the definitive 'great artists' of popular music, and the albums they recorded as the ultimate 'masterpieces'. Telling the history of popular music, as evident from numerous guides, encyclopedias, magazines, websites and television series, is conventionally done by compiling annotated lists of the rock-pop canon.

This state of things in the field, as well as its assessment by scholars, sometimes evokes critique and resentment. The relative exclusion of female musicians from the canon, for example, or the absence of non-Anglo-American music (pop-rock or other), are two salient reasons. Indeed, the very possibility for a canon to exist in an art form like popular music has also been questioned.

The articles in this special issue of *Popular Music* address some of the questions raised around the existence of a canon in popular music. In light of the idea that popular music has multiple canons, Antti-Ville Kärjä offers a possible classification of canons, according to their social and cultural function, into 'mainstream', 'alternative' and 'prescribed' canons. Following him, Ralf Von Appen and André Doehring examine the 'mainstream' canon of pop-rock as it is typically presented in 'Greatest Albums of All Time' lists, and analyse some of the common evaluative justifications for these albums' alleged 'greatness'. However, as much as such lists became common practice in popular music journalism, the cultural power of the popular music canon – just like any artistic canon – resides in its unofficial status. There is no formal mechanism of canonisation. This is one reason why attempts to formalise the process through official awards and prizes often raise objection. Another reason for such disapproval stems from the promotional aspects involved in prizes and awards. Mary R. Watson and N. Anand highlight this point in their study of the influence of winning a Grammy prize on sales figures.

Once established, canons exert cultural power by influencing memory and heritage and by radiating out on to the work of musicians. That is, canons influence the narration of the past, and they inspire the radius of creativity for the future. Katherine Skinner demonstrates the first point in her analysis of the retrospective canonisation of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (originally released in 1952) in the 1990s. Her study shows that the canonisation of this collection of songs served the interests of prominent rock musicians in presenting their own canonic work as rooted in and stemming from folk traditions. On the other side of the rock canon, so to speak, Mathew Bannister uncovers the artistic practices and white masculine patterns of indie guitar rock of the 1980s as directly influenced by the canonic rock tradition of earlier periods. Indeed, the influence of the artistic and cultural models set by the Anglo-American pop-rock canon is not confined to the US and UK – it is worldwide. National fields of popular music in many different countries have been largely affected by these models and the belief in their artistic value. Michèle Ollivier demonstrates this point in her study of prestige in the field of popular music in Quebec, by pointing to the artistic hierarchy that emerged there from the 1960s onward.

On a slightly different note, Wander Nunes Frota argues in the Middle Eight section for a reformulation of the study of popular music in Brazil. Criticising the tendency to simply valorise the canon of *MPB* (*Música Popular Brasileira*), he calls for a contextualisation of the music within wider social issues, a point that is probably relevant for the study of popular music canons everywhere.

A request for bibliographic references about canons in popular music, placed on the IASPM list on April 2005, has yielded only a handful of items. It seems that popular music scholars have been hesitant in studying canonisation and related topics. Our belief that canonisation, together with the wider themes of cultural capital and artistic hierarchy, should be a major topic in popular music studies, and that it deserves more attention from researchers, has motivated the initiative for this special issue of *Popular Music*. The articles presented here are hopefully only an appetiser for future research on this subject.

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