

Popular Music and Retro Culture in the Digital Era.

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Discourses around retromanic impulses in 21st century popular music have circulated for the last decade, with several journalists exploring the notion that musical innovation has slowed, or even halted, with the rise of the Internet and its seemingly eternal archives. Simon Reynolds (2011), Mark Fisher (2014) and Paul Morley (2010a, b, 2013, 2014) argue that there is a dearth of novelty in contemporary music owing to a 'crisis of over-documentation triggered by digital technology [increasing] the presence of the past in our lives' (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 55–6). Jean Hogarty's *Popular Music and Retro Culture in the Digital Era* is the first academic overview of these issues (based loosely on her PhD thesis), and can claim to be the most comprehensive and insightful study of retromania and young audiences' search for so-called 'authenticity' in music today.

As a piece of academic literature analysing the contemporary musical landscape, Hogarty's book is pertinent and vital. In its focus on the impact of the Internet on audiences and musical production, it stands apart in a field of research that remains largely invested in upheavals in the industry more broadly. By investigating issues of retromania empirically (through the conduction of interviews with forty young people) and theoretically (drawing on McLuhan, 1964; Derrida, 1994; Williams, 1961; Hesmondhalgh, 2005 and more), Hogarty crafts a text that feels altogether more convincing and carefully considered than, for instance, the oft-erratic diatribe that is Reynolds's totemic *Retromania*. The reader is led through a logical structure, beginning with differing notions of youth/ageing and progressing into analyses of retro culture, generational differences, hauntological 'structures of feeling' and, finally, technology's impact on the supposed slowing of innovation. The middle sections are particularly interesting, and provide the most innovative elements of the text. The author notes the need to 'update the existing academic theories' to more acutely reflect the changes brought about by digitalisation (p. 54), addressing this challenge through the development of key concepts such as 'vicarious nostalgia' in Chapter 5. This 'structure of feeling' that Hogarty claims connects (most) young listeners today 'is nostalgia for a time period when a future seemed possible; [a] yearning for a pre-biographical time period in which ... music was more futuristic [and] sincere' (pp. 89–90). 'Younger fans listen to older music ... because they wish to go back to the future' (p. 130). This is compellingly evidenced in statements by interviewees Amanda, who deems it critical to 'have this really eclectic taste [with a] range of cultural references' (p. 63), and Martha, who elects to listen to 20th century 'bands [that] are talking about the sort of things going on in their time' (p. 66). By fusing earlier journalistic debates with a nuanced interpretation of Derrida's notion of hauntology and a selection of illuminating quotes from interviewees, this intriguing section of the book succeeds in rendering retromanic arguments more scholarly and substantial.

Despite its importance, however, the text is somewhat flawed in its absolute conviction in the Internet's halting of musical innovation. Hogarty and her interviewees continually emphasise a problematic binary between physical/material and digital/immaterial music, referring to streaming and downloading as 'inauthentic' (p. 100) compared with the 'journey' and 'discovery' involved in purchasing CDs

or vinyl (p. 117). Music in the 21st century is frequently belittled by interviewees owing to its apparent coldness, disposability (particularly in mp3 format) and impoverished sound quality, with Hogarty producing five summarising points to suggest that 'music today is about commercialism [and] mimicry' (p. 86). Further amplifying this view, Hogarty makes repeated value judgments such as 'older music was more authentic [and] had more socio-political relevance' (p. 66). Aside from the concern that Hogarty builds these conclusions on the statements of a few randomly selected individuals, the main issue here is that literature debating the constructedness of 'authenticity' is effectively ignored in favour of foregrounding a dichotomy between past glories and present failures. The decline of the traditional album format is mourned throughout, and is presented as an 'honest' form of expression without recognition of the LP's history as a marketable packaged product for record labels. Channelling Reynolds, Fisher and Morley, Hogarty describes the lack of 'substantial' music today as being a product of a culture of 'glut/clot' (p. 46). This technological determinist argument proposes that audiences are over-exposed to the 'cluttered cultural environment' (p. 46) that is the Internet's vast archive, leading to a 'distracted experience [in which] nothing can be remembered' (p. 113). Music is therefore no longer able to percolate in a localised vacuum, with easy access to a 'glut' of influence from nigh-infinite temporal and spatial contexts, meaning that artists today are too often entranced by musical artefacts from the past, rather than seeking out futuristic sounds from the present. As such, nothing new is created.

The problem is that, in establishing this perspective, Hogarty focuses almost exclusively on one genre: white heterosexual rock. There are few references to hip hop, grime or club music (aside from a few allusions to acid house, presumably inspired by Reynolds), with the conclusion seeming to be that black audiences are too marginal to be worthy of account. Grime's appeal, for instance, is dismissed as 'quite limited' (p. 22) despite its huge chart success through the 2010s. It is telling that Hogarty's sardonic description of the contemporary mainstream musical landscape stretches only to 'Ed Sheeran and The Script' (p. 135). Significantly, the interviewees are described as white university students with bohemian interests (effectively fitting the 'hipster' mould), with their interest in 'urban' music notably restricted to white rappers (p. 87), and Hogarty occasionally references the limitations of such an exclusive sample. This may seem like a minor issue, if not for the fact that genres such as hip hop have responded far more effectively to the difficulties of so-called 'glut/clot' culture than rock. Rock has stagnated in a period of rapid-release schedules, malleable identity performativity on social media and ease-of-access to digital music production software, given the genre's historical foregrounding of 'authentic' working-class masculinity, reliance on conceptual album-length projects and the financial difficulties that come from forming a band of several musicians. Hip-hop artists and fans have readily embraced the mutable platforms provided by the Internet, with 2017's charts testifying to the genre's willingness to synthesise with social media hype, audience participation and the ephemerality of musical consumption online. Its musicians, unlike those of rock, produce and promote music at a pace that complements these developments.

As such, the shortcoming of Hogarty's book is one that plagues retromanic debates in general. Despite the valuable contributions that it makes to academic research into popular music online, the discussion remains grounded in a rock-centric narrative that too strongly celebrates the notion of authenticity, the traditional album format and linear progression. In an era of transient social media, in which

young people live their lives on- and offline simultaneously, it is the ephemeral, marginal genres omitted here that have continued to breed innovation and novelty. Despite these issues, however, *Popular Music and Retro Culture in the Digital Era* remains a useful and interesting book that successfully combines the multiple strands of the retromania debate into a single cohesive academic work.

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The Beatles.

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When attempting to explain the band's titanic legacy, Ian Inglis reminds us that 'The Beatles presented a radical alternative to the perennial dominance of the solo singer' (p. 170). The latest in the *Icons of Pop Music* series, Inglis's *The Beatles* demonstrates how essential and, even decades later, radical that group identity still remains. Out of the 10 published and forthcoming volumes in the series, *The Beatles* is only the second (following Richard Witts's examination of The Velvet Underground) to focus on a group, rather than an individual artist. Previous volumes on Buddy Holly and Brian Wilson duly noted the contributions of each artist's respective group while primarily focusing on the individual, but Inglis's work emphasises how essential each of the fab foursome was to the band's music, image and legacy. As Joshua Wolf Shenk (2014) discusses in *Powers of Two: Finding the Essence of Innovation in Creative Pairs*, the image of the lone genius continues to dominate popular and scholarly perception of creativity and invention. Yet the Beatles' stature, with their collectively inspired output driven, largely, by the combined genius of the John Lennon/Paul McCartney songwriting partnership, continues to confound this belief.