



Remembering Pete and Charlie

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Early in 2010 two men whose work has influenced the study of popular music died within a few weeks of each other. Richard A. (Pete) Peterson was 77 when he passed on February 4 in Nashville and Charlie Gillett died in a London hospital at the age of 68 on March 17.

I don't think Pete and Charlie ever met – one was a career academic and the other by turns an author, journalist, small label owner and music publisher and finally radio presenter – but I like to feel they would have got on if they had. Both were enthusiasts for music, with an eye for the telling detail in their favourite artists and genres. But, more than that, each contributed significantly to our understanding of the rise of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, in a large part by focusing on the role of independent record labels.

'The rise of rock and roll' is, of course, the subtitle of Charlie Gillett's monumental history *The Sound of the City*. This was an elaboration of his masters' thesis from Columbia University, written in 1965 and based principally on 'many days spent studying back issues of *Billboard*' as he wrote in a so far unpublished memoir. The primary value of *The Sound of the City*, first published in the US in 1970, lay in Charlie's narrative skill, but it also offered a modicum of sociological analysis, in a brief discussion of the new youth audience via a quotation from David Riesman, and (hidden among the end-notes) a statistical breakdown of pop and rock 'n' roll hits which showed that the majority of the latter were issued by indie labels.

Five years later, more tables of Top 10 hits were included in 'Cycles in symbol production: the case of popular music', published in the *American Sociological Review*. The authors were Richard Peterson and David G. Berger. Their tables introduced the 'four firm ratio' which confirmed Gillett's conclusion that, in the late 1950s, the dominance of the industry by the majors and their established acts was disrupted, although Peterson and Berger's methodology did not distinguish records by genre, only by the career status of the performers.

Gillett's book (though not its statistics) was cited at several points in 'Cycles in symbol production', a sign of the status it had already achieved in the nascent field of popular music studies. The article itself also marked a key stage in the development of Peterson's reputation as the principal author of the 'production of culture' thesis, which he had unveiled at an American Sociological Association meeting a year earlier, in 1974.

One of the striking features of the thesis is its refusal to take into account the formal or aesthetic characteristics of an art form when its evolution is analysed.

This refusal is evident even in Peterson's most renowned essay on popular music, 'Why 1955? Explaining the advent of rock music', published in issue 9/1 of this journal in 1990. 'Elvis Presley' is definitely not the correct answer to 'Why 1955?'

The strict exclusion of music from the production of the culture thesis was somewhat at odds with Pete's well known lifelong enthusiasm for country music. It was therefore a delight when in 1997 he published *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, whose autobiographical introduction mentions the author's introduction to barn dance radio shows as a small child on visits to his grandfather's farm circa 1940. Although Peterson's theoretical concerns provide the skeleton of the book, it is fleshed out lovingly with numerous examples and anecdotes.

At the times of their untimely deaths, both Charlie and Pete were actively engaged in their respective musical work and it is saddening to find myself writing even this meagre appreciation of their contribution to our understanding and love of the music. Both were generous collaborators and I hope that others will provide much more extensive assessments of their work in the future.