contact

Citation

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THE MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF POP

For several reasons it's difficult for a musician to talk or write about pop. Firstly, prejudice - prejudice against, from fellow musicians, and prejudice for (and therefore against all other musics and musicians) from pop fans. Both tend to cut off pop and discourage consideration of the music. "Academic" analysis is sneered at from both sides. Secondly, the old bogey, commercialism, and what must (without prejudice) be recognised as the undoubted triviality which often results from it. This is not so much an objective difficulty as an emotional block. The tendency is to say "ugh" and switch off one's ears. Thirdly, there is the incontrovertible fact that pop is more than just music; it is an integral part of a whole cultural package. To conventionally trained musicians, used to the purity, the abstractness, the 'out-of-time-ness' of 'art-music', this is an unfamiliar phenomenon. We often don't know exactly what we're talking about, nor what terms to use.

All three difficulties, considered as objections to musical discussion, can be easily rebutted. Prejudice, as elsewhere, is to be overcome. Triviality - well, triviality in music, as many Ph.D.'s bear witness, is not necessarily a barrier to analysis. Commercialism simply necessitates of the intrepid student rather more fortitude than usual. Extra-musical complications - perhaps the most difficult problem - mean merely that the musician, following the lead of the ethno-musicologist, must enlist the aid of sociology, psychology and anthropology, and emerge from his splended isolation (it may be that pop and jazz, once better accepted as subjects for musical discussion, will be the strongest single spur to the acceptance of ethno-musicology in our musical studies).

But it is not merely that the objections to discussion of the musical significance of pop can be refuted. There are also more positive reasons for recommending consideration. First, pop, like Everest and the moon, is there. Until the metamorphosis of the musician into an ostrich is completed, there seems no reason to neglect what is staring us in the ears. Moreover, the speed of development and transmission of music today necessitates and makes it possible that we react more quickly than before; we need in music a non-journalistic 'modern history'. Second, pop, despite commercialism, has resulted in a considerable amount of exciting music. He who has ears to hear ... Third, pop is an extremely useful tool for the study of other modern musics, the entire modern musical situation and even contemporary culture as a whole. And if one vital purpose of listening to and studying music is not an increased knowledge of the condition of man, then my desire to participate in it is at an end.

In case the gulf between, say the Rolling Stones and Pierre Boulez seems too great for my last point to be taken seriously, let me try to explain what I mean by it. First of all, it is inconceivable that in our kind of world different musics could coexist without good reason - without relationship. We are all too much part of one another for that. Secondly, it is true to say that pop has direct intellectual roots in 'art', (the American Beat and Hipster traditions particularly). Thirdly, many of the musical sources of pop - American Negro music, American and British Folk music, for instance - have also helped to produce modern American and British 'art-music'. But much more important than these superficialities is what I'll call cultural stance. This is

usually hidden by surface characteristics. To identify it, to separate the wood from the trees, one needs a cross-cultural perspective. We are just beginning to acquire this. By cultural stance I mean basic cultural perspective, basic world-view, if you like. In music this means looking beyond superficial stylistic characteristics and changes to primary techniques and their implications. Consider the retreat, in twentieth century 'serious' music, from major-minor tonality, from harmony, from 'pure' tone and traditional difinitions of the music/noise distinction; consider the advent of new structural techniques: ostinato, melodic extension and variation, rhythmic pattern, college; consider the resurrection of old modes and the development of new melodic principles equally committed to purely melodic meaning and against harmonic implications; consider the complexifying of rhythm; consider the retreat from notation and the rebirth of improvisation; consider the abandonment of the orchestra for the chamber group. Now, ask yourself whether all these developments though they manifest themselves in different ways, are not also characteristic of pop. Analysis on this level (the level of macro-technique, as it might be called) has hardly begun; but perhaps you can see what I mean. The technique can also show us differences as well as connections, of course. For example, pop is obviously a ritualistic activity rather than a pure music. It works through myth (though the import of the myth is not easily verbalised), induces quasi-liturgical participation and has meanings and effects not immediately perceptible from sounds alone. In contrast, 'serious' music of this century, though often ritualistic in feeling and, perhaps, intent, lacks the ritualistic situation. It is a religion with a priestly elite but little participatory congregation. Most differences of this kind can, like this one, be accounted for by differences in history, function or sociological situation.

The most important musical influence on pop is, I think, the blues. This is interesting because the blues were formed, of course, from a mixture of European and African sources, and if one examines the development of 'serious' twentieth century music, one finds that it is precisely in the tempering of traditional European techniques by techniques more typical of non-Western cultures (non-tonal modes, rhythmic complexity, variation and repetition forms, improvisation, contrapuntal, polyrhythmic or heterophonic textures rather than harmony, etc.) that a great deal of this development lies. From this point of view (that is, the point of view of cultural stance) blues (and its relative, jazz) can be regarded as the archetypal music of our century. And so pop's position in this tree of relationships becomes clear. Pop has adapted the stance of the blues from one suitable to the racial alienation of the American Negro to one suitable to the generational alienation of the white, Western teenager. The cultural schizophrenia and cultural synthesis characteristic of the blues, together with many of the techniques associated with these, remain. My point is that they constitute a motif which permeates our culture. Whether one ascribes this to the impact of tribalising electronic media on print culture (McLuhan), or to the development of "historical consciousness" into "psychoanalytical consciousness" (Norman Brown), or to the return of Caliban after his too-ferocious repression by Prospero (Wilfrid Mellers), or to the convergence of formerly disparate cultures to form the one "global Village", "spaceship earth" (Buckminster Fuller), or to a complex mixture of these and other influences, is immaterial. The result is clear. Certainly 'straight' modern music, as it has developed

pop, jazz, the folk revival and the emergence in the West of non-Western musics, such as that of India, are part of a coherent pattern. The American Negro is at once a symptom and a manifestation of this. Hence his formative role in Western popular culture throughout the last half century - culminating in pop.

Pop itself has a history, of course; and one which can be seen in terms of its cultural stance. The most important phases in 'historical pop' (Rock 'n' Roll, Liverpool Beat, Rhythm 'n' Blues, Soul) are not arbitrarily juxtaposed but related -- to some extent sequentially. And the pattern which these relationships denote can be understood in terms of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' (a tendency to veer away from or towards Europe). Rock 'n' Roll set the pattern off, dropping a bomb on the Western value-system, making possible and necessitating the formation of a subversive subculture. Beat (and its American contemporaries, Dylanesque folk-rock and West Coast surfing pop) 'whitened' rock 'n' roll, contributing creatively from the white side and establishing pop as a distinct musical phenomenon. British R & B, returning to the blues, carried us away from Europe once again, until Soul absorbed its stance into a more sophisticated style, whose mainstream-feel repeats that of Beat at a 'blacker' cultural level. Rock 'n' Roll and R & B are radical and ground-breaking; Beat and Soul are consolidatory and secure. The musical connections between the partners in each pair make the point. But they should not obscure the other important point about this pattern: the overall move towards the primitive (made clear, for example, by a comparison of Rock 'n' Roll and R & B and the blues styles from which they derive). The historical development seems to have had the purpose of carrying pop, by a repeated thrust-relax process, to the 'right' cultural stance for today's cultural situation.

In the course of doing this it also witnessed an increasing maturity and variety of technique, as a tradition was established, as musicians and fans aged, and as different generations emerged. Pop development became ever less linear and ever more spherical -- until with Soul (that is, the peak of popularity of Soul - about four or five years ago) its history came to an end. What we have now is a new mainstream (just as jazz and revolutionary 'serious' modern music began as rebellion, eccentricity or exoticism and quickly became mainstreams). Revolt has become style, as George Melly says (though revolt is still implicit in the style). Now anything goes. The result is a pluralism as impressive and healthy as that of 'straight' music at the moment, and one very typical of our world.

One characteristic of this pluralism now is a breaking down of barriers and a confusion of labels. Given pop's achievement of autonomy, identity and self-confidence, this was probably inevitable. The rock-jazz of Nucleus and Miles Davis on the one hand and Blood Sweat and Tears and Chicago on the other; the 'electric folk' of Fairport Convention et al.; the Who's 'rock opera', Tommy; the 'free pop' of the Pink Floyd and the Soft Machine, in which the influence of 'free-form' New Wave jazz and the 'straight' Avant Garde mingles with pop-derived vitality : all, like similar hybrids in other areas (e.g. Indo-Jazz Fusions, Ravi Shankar's East-West explorations, the

Third Stream, African 'high life' music, etc.), merely acknowledge the relationships which were pointed out above (as well as mutating the differences). And they are becoming more consciously acknowledged; instinct is becoming theory and practice. Already musicians trained in and conversant with various different musics are emerging. It will certainly not be long before we have but one Avant Garde, in which labels are irrelevant and sources - Cage, Coleman, the Soft Machine - mingle excitingly. And eventually musical differences may be a matter for taste and musical function rather than training, history and prejudice. A change in consciousness of the dimensions involved could not for ever confine itself to elites (hence pop); nor can it always dismember itself in the interests of class and artistic apartheid. Pop is here; the melting-pot is only just beginning to simmer.

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