

Zitierhinweis

Martin, Paul: Rezension über: Irene Morra, *Britishness, Popular Music and National Identity. The Making of Modern Britain*, London: Routledge, 2013, in: *Reviews in History*, 2016, March, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/1910, heruntergeladen über Website



copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

With the SNP decimation of all other parties in Scotland, in the 2015 General Election, Irene Morra's engaging study of popular music and Britishness is perhaps more poignant than she might have originally anticipated! Populist ideas of nation are often based on casual assumptions which dissolve under closer scrutiny and, as Morra asserts, the role of popular music as part of this assumption and indeed as a promoter of it has never really been probed very deeply.

In her book, Morra puts the notion of Britain and Britishness under the microscope. By using popular music as the lens through which to look at it, she makes a significant contribution to an emergent body of work. In the last two years, popular music and place has come in for academic treatment in Sara Cohen et al's, *Sites of Popular Music Heritage* and Keith Gildart's *Images of England Through Popular Music*.⁽¹⁾ Here, Morra explores pop music as a part of the structure of British national identity. What the book does very usefully is to point to numerous examples of establishment assimilation, the willingness of some pop musicians to pro-actively seek this, and the re-using of popular music to serve contemporary agendas. In her methodology, she outlines her focus on the mainstream music press which began as ostensibly counter-cultural voices but which have become part of the establishment. This is done most effectively. Morra also acknowledges that: 'this is not to deny the importance of self-consciously important periodicals, blogs and podcasts...' (p. 14). However, evidence of dissenting voices, such as Neil Young's anti-corporate sponsorship 'This Note's For You' song, might have provided a more rounded picture.

Morra uses the opening and closing ceremonies from the London Olympics to introduce the themes and issues that the book addresses. She alludes to the use and abuse of the popular past in the present to serve contemporary narratives. She cites the differences in opinion between liberal and conservative reviews which either celebrated or disowned the 'leftie' modernity held to be inherent in Boyle's staging. Where a conservative call to 'bring back the Rolling Stones' was made as if this group represented a truer Britishness, Morra rightly states 'it underlines the extent to which national popular music can be invoked to articulate very different social and political agendas' (p. 20).

The book then moves on to the artificiality of the idea of 'Britishness'. There have been proposals to replace May Day with some kind of British day since it was first mooted by Tory backbencher Robert Atkins in 1982, with Gordon Brown returning to this idea for different reasons in 2008 (p. 34). The phenomenon of Britpop in the 1990s, can be read as a rejuvenated version of the 1960s 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign, which sought to co-opt the zeitgeist of the groovy younger generation to an essentially establishment economic agenda. Britpop, though, it is argued, was really no more than imposed Englishness (p. 35). The media hype around the southerners Blur competing with the northerners Oasis for chart supremacy was arguably a symbol of the dead end that English nationalism always results in. Though Scottish, Welsh or Irish identity may be defined through separateness from England, England as the historical invader of its neighbours has nowhere to go except into itself via local rivalry and the call for regional parliaments. Where Celtic countries can point to an historical identity of difference, England can only atomise.

Outside of this though, regionalism as celebration can be a strong identity. Morra looks at traditional folk music and its revival and attempts by the far right to appropriate it. Usefully, she points to the opposing celebratory uses of folk in 2009 with the St George's Day festivities in Trafalgar Square, and the Tolpuddle Martyrs, heavily citing participants like Billy Bragg. As she states: 'Although the events shared some of the same performers, the music took on different social meanings in each context' (p. 46). These kind of instances are one of the book's strengths; very definite contrasting or oppositional examples of how popular music has been either appropriated or has accrued a patina of 'Britishness' through sentimental referencing. One might though point to the absence of references to the progressive folk movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s as evidence of evolution in contradistinction to tradition. Bands like Fairport Convention, Mellow Candle, Trees, Jade,

Fotheringay and Comus mixed the traditional with a contemporary and progressive instrumentalisation and stood as an example of forward, organic movement rather than a copy and paste of the traditional from the past in the present.

Morra discusses the notion of the 1960s as a decade that has ever since been musically mythologised. She draws on both Simon Reynolds' postmodern analysis of the contemporary state of play in pop (p. 52) and Barry Faulks's work on music hall (pp. 58–9) to this end and deftly analyses opposing notions of Musical Britishness through the 1960s. An artistic immersion in the then present, as exemplified by the movement from pop to rock for instance. This is counterpointed by music halls' backward looking idea of popular Englishness which is simultaneously present in the popular music of the decade.

The idea of the 1960s as an idealised moment is constantly re-invoked in the present as a marker of modernity, in contrast to the 1970s view, in which the previous decade was seen as 'dead and buried' by its maturing adherents. A new teenage generation was looking away from The Beatles and The Stones as the music of their older siblings. However, in our modern age, we have the luxury of a longer view. We celebrate and recognise forgotten elements of the past in the present, revisiting the familiar with different eyes and ears. As such, the recent CD box set *Oh Yes We Can Love: A History of Glam Rock* (2) has as its first and therefore 'origin' track, Noel Coward singing 'Mad Dogs And Englishmen'.

It should come as no surprise that as institutions, organisations or social movements grow bigger, they or elements of them are either appropriated by or pro-actively seek inclusion within the establishment. Popular music is no different. It is the tension that Morra addresses between artistic integrity or vision and commercial and establishment concerns within pop that enables it to be constantly self-renewing. The extensive citations and quotes she uses to discuss Orwell's notion of the 'wrong people' being in control explores this. In the section 'Another Brick In The Wall' (pp.70–1) class is critiqued, not least through some colourful quotes. This posits that the experience of growing up rough is seen as a virtual prerequisite for an experiential and emotional recognition of who the wrong people are by dint of being on the receiving end of their authority.

One aspect missing is the experiencing of the old as new. This is also an omission in Reynolds' *Retromania* (3) which Morra also draws from. One reason perhaps that past music, from the 1960s or otherwise, is so perennially in the present, is not simply as Reynolds would have it, to keep the fear and anxiety of the near future at arms length. It is also because whilst linearly old, it can be aesthetically new to younger, less experienced ears. A vinyl revival is now (April 2015) revealed not to be powered solely by the older men who grew up with it, but by young people of both sexes in a backlash against the intangibility and material formlessness of a download, with the 'fresh'-sounding music of the 1960s sounding new to young ears, while much contemporary music sounds overly familiar. A corollary of this it might be argued is that an embracing of the musical past rather than its rejection by the young has nurtured a will to change or innovate. Possibly it is too soon to tell.

Morra addresses (by their nature) intangible themes like the loss of meaning in the term 'indie band', emotional sincerity in song (setting Bowie against Elton John) and anti-rockist reconstructions of artists like Paul Weller (in the Style Council) and Gary Numan. These are all well communicated and strongly demonstrated.

Certainly, the numerous examples of self-analytical northern indie band songs (p. 98) and class Mora cites are valid, but amongst this working class musical miserabilism, there also celebrations of class origin. Justin Sullivan, singer in Bradford's New Model Army (NMA), has for 35 years sung of the desertion of the north for the enticement of the south or the great otherness of abroad (e.g. in 'Green And The Grey'). The antique quaintness of the northern clog was brilliantly re-validated as essential footwear by NMA's followers in the 1980s, celebrated in 1986's *Clog Dancers* EP. This equates pretty much to Morra's discussion on Irishness in England in chapter five 'The English people' and also the regionalist assumptions she describes (pp. 100–1).

Morra takes the popular music press to task by showing the presumption of a male audience in portraying women musicians as additional to or separate from rather than a natural part of popular music, although more context could have been provided if she had drawn on more genre-specific elements of the music press. She rightly points to how, in the punk era, women like The Slits, Poly Styrene and The Raincoats did not position themselves in a guitar tradition, as they had done in the 1960s. Groups like Liverpool's hopelessly obscure The Beat Chicks or the slightly more well known Liverbirds (in that there is footage of them on Youtube), have still yet to be sufficiently recognised for their pioneering work in simply existing at a time when girls were supposed to remain adoring fans rather than active musical participants in the beat boom.

In this context Morra discusses divas instead, with the late, great Dusty Springfield chief amongst them. For this was (beyond the prop strumming of an acoustic guitar) what a musical woman was meant to be at the time. As she rightly notes, girl singers were positioned as products of the structures enabled by male guitar groups, not part of the enabling process itself (p. 116).

Morra discusses race in separate sections on white and black. Much of this is drawn from sociological readings (notably Hebdige), and she asserts that British black or ethnic popular music, however championed, remains a minority within the mainstream, or is perceived as underground. She cites Bane on Cream (p. 130) to support her assertion that the blues was less popular than blues rock (a largely white medium), Arguably this was only partially so. It refers to the second blues boom of the latter 1960s. The first British blues boom in the early 1960s was presaged on the rejection by white youth of white rock 'n' roll once the 'authentic' black version or blues and 'blues 'n' rhythm' as it was originally dubbed by (the white American) Jerry Wexler had been heard. When imitated it mutated, and Morra quotes George Melly as saying: '...something original had managed to come through.' (p. 130). It was the Rolling Stones, especially Brian Jones, who insisted on the middle-aged black blues man Howlin' Wolf being booked on the same edition of the popular US pop show *Shindig!* as themselves In 1965. It was white mods who provided the black Prince Buster with an escort of chrome mirrored motor scooters as he came through London, and black American soul music was their chosen musical form. The championing of black music by white teenagers is an essential part of British pop music culture history. The ska / Two Tone movement, which Morra also addresses, personifies this. It is the industry and the power structures within it that have been the active bleaching agents. Morra's conclusion regarding integration is that it is celebratory of multi-culturalism, but is 'owned' by white voices.

Having attended the 1978 *Rock Against Racism* festival in Hackney's Victoria Park, I have to disagree with the assertion that its repetition in 2008 showed the limited success of the original (p. 140). Events like this impact on the issues they are designed for at the time, not in perpetuity and the occurrence of the later festival does not invalidate the importance of either of the 1978 RAR festivals at Brockwell Park and Victoria Park. We may as well invalidate the defeat of Mosley's British fascists at Cable Street in 1936 because it didn't stop Mosley returning after the Second World War. Too assert that it is always 'white indie artists who speak for an inherently peripheral multi cultural community' (p. 140) is also debateable. It is the media who provide the platform for reportage. It is their editorial decisions that determine who is the most televisually worthy. I am not sure a thorough survey of the internet, where artists have ownership of their own platforms, would tell the same story.

Overall though, *Britishness, Popular Music, and National Identity* is an absorbing, well-researched and richly exemplified treatise and provides much food for thought. Anyone with an interest in popular music and culture or the mores of identity should find this a rewarding and convincing read.

Notes

1. *Sites of Popular Music Heritage: Memories, Histories, Places*, ed. Sara Cohen, Robert Knifton, Marion Leonard (London, 2014); Keith Gildart, *Images of England Through Popular Music: Class, Youth and Rock 'n' Roll, 1955–1976* (Farnham, 2013).
2. *Oh Yes We Can Love: A History of Glam Rock*, 5 CD box set, Universal Music, 2013.
3. Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop culture's addiction to its own past* (London, 2011).