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Music, Memory and Memoir

Music, Memory and Memoir: Critical and creative engagement with an emerging genre

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Abstract

In this article, we outline and explore a plural and flexible methodology for engaging with the contemporary music memoir. These are texts in which narrative experimentation and self-conscious interrogations of voice shape content. They are texts that blur and blend the lines between memory, storytelling and myth. They offer a literate and culturally engaged reader the opportunity to shape their own musical histories and memories. We view these titles as a new and emerging genre. Our work, which we are developing in a forthcoming edited collection entitled *Music, Memory and Memoir*, approaches this fluid genre with a fluid methodology. We combine scholarly rigor and critical analysis in our readings of text but these combine with an open-ended and reflexive approach to our own critical and cultural voices.

Keywords

memoir

punk

indie

autobiography

nostalgia

critical

creative

Research questions

The title of this article raises two central questions: in what ways can the contemporary music memoir be seen as an 'emerging genre' and why choose to engage with it through 'critical and creative' techniques? In order to answer these questions, we begin by looking at debates about memoir – and creative non-fiction more generally – as both a genre and a methodology for cultural enquiry. We can then suggest how the appendage 'music' to the memoir form might develop these debates. This enables us to suggest how the recent examples of that genre, with which we are concerned, might be understood as formally distinctive and how that formal distinctiveness produces new kinds of knowledge. Our research examines the growing number of music memoirs being written by figures from contemporary music cultures. These are texts that combine personal narrative with 'insider' perspective on celebrated cultural moments in popular music history. They resist panoramic linearity and cannot be reduced to exercises in simple nostalgia. We are aiming to move beyond a discursive critical relationship with these texts by adopting a new and fluid methodological approach. We are also aiming to blur distinctions between criticality and creativity. As academics, we are interested in exploring the liminal spaces between scholarly investigation of form and cultural

narrative. But as music fans, we are also interested in the ways that we construct our own cultural selves through engagement with the textual practices in question. We are currently working with a range of academics, musicians and cultural figures on an edited collection entitled *Music, Memory and Memoir* in which these issues inform the tone, form and content of our writing. We are consciously underpinning our critical positions with creative constructions of our cultural selves. The objective in this article is to outline some of the methodological challenges and opportunities in navigating such territory and to articulate where we anticipate our research will take us.

Memoir as a genre

We define memoir here as a personal narrative which embraces the partial, mutable, fragmentary and subjective nature of the past events being narrated and the 'self' who is narrating them. As such it subverts, challenges and critiques the fantasy of many other historical forms; that the past is unproblematically available to be re-created seamlessly, whole and in-tact as text. As a genre it has garnered much academic interest because of this instability (Couser 2011; De Man 1984; Pleasance 2015; Scott 1998; Singer and Walker 2013; Stacey and Wolff 2013; Stanley 1992). It is an instability that is seen as challenging two dichotomies; that between fact and fiction and that between the creative and the critical. The ways in which it does this make clear why it is of both generic and methodological interest here.

In order to explore how memoir challenges the dichotomy between fact and fiction, Paul de Man's now touchstone description of reading autobiography as like being 'caught in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel' (de Man 1984: 70) is useful. For de Man reading autobiography puts readers in the realm of the 'undecidable' (de Man 1984:

70). The textual strategies come from fiction while the subject matter refers directly to a real world beyond the text, in a way that fiction does not. This pulls readers in opposing directions; between referentiality and non-referentiality. For de Man this undecidability puts the reader in an uncomfortable, even impossible, position. In order to proceed with the text, they have to decide in which direction they want to exit the revolving door or risk becoming increasingly disorientated as they go round in circles. De Man is acknowledging that reading practices are shaped by a dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction, in which they are understood as antithetical to each other. Elsewhere it has been acknowledged that this dichotomy has been historically formed. Williams argues that it had 'crippling' (Williams 1977: 146) effects on reading practices and has operated to contain particular kinds of writing within 'the specializing concept of "literature" and questions of "the aesthetic"' (Williams 1977: 150). We are challenging this simplistic dichotomy, as do the texts with which we are concerned.

Much theorization of the shifting category of life writing, auto/biography or creative non-fiction has sought to show how it problematizes or challenges this dichotomy (Bourne Taylor and Kaplan 2009; Renza 1980; Scott 1998). For such theory de Man's concept of 'the undecidable' produces uncomfortable experiences of reading. They would be seen as productive experiences of discomfort; which is required to unsettle conventional boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, criticality and creativity and to allow different writing and reading practices to emerge. Such new kinds of practice are intimately bound up with the necessarily undecidable relationship between the written text and the world beyond the text to which it refers. Louis A. Renza

expresses this need to define a kind of writing that refuses a dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction:

We might say, then, that autobiography is neither fictive nor nonfictive, not even a mixture of the two. We might view it instead as a unique, self-defining mode of self-referential expression, one that allows, then inhibits, its ostensible project of self-representation, of converting oneself into the present promised by language (Renza 1980: 295).

Recent memoirs perform this 'ostensible project' and its necessary problematization of the relationship between the self and language. Lauren Slater's *Spasm*, pertinently subtitled, *A Memoir with Lies*, tells the ostensible story of the onset of epilepsy in her adolescence. The afterword to the text unsettles this account with Slater suggesting that she might never have actually had epilepsy in any literal sense. She has used epilepsy as a way of producing a 'narrative truth' (Slater 2000: 219) about her difficult relationship with her mother, about which she has many painful lapses of memory, and for which epilepsy stands as a metaphor in the text. Similarly, Paul Morley plays with different narrative strategies in his memoir to construct identity and to subvert conventional ideas about the relationship between his writing and the real events it invokes. Specifically, Morley undermines the notion of direct referentiality. As he translates experience into writing, he is self-consciously aware that he is constructing new meanings, not recording a past that is fixed. For Morley and Slater the textual 'undecidability' of memoir provides a form in which they can play with identity construction. Morley's memoir helps to understand the significance of music in this self-construction. His is the memoir of a music journalist and it reflects on how his writing about music, and the band Joy Division in particular, became a way of navigating the trauma of his father's suicide:

I was thinking deeply about pop music, the newer the better, to avoid thinking deeply about my father. I was paying more close anxious attention to the suicide of the lead singer of Joy Division than I was to the suicide of my father (Morley 2000: 272).

Memoir, then, of all the creative non-fiction forms, might be understood as the genre most well suited to this project of self-representation and its impossibility. Memoir is as much about engaging with what cannot be remembered as with what is remembered. Memoir texts are produced out of the narration of what is remembered and the gaps around that. The selves of memoir emerge out of these two forces – what is remembered and what has been lost to memory and so remains ineffable in any direct way. The narrating author produces a self, or shifting selves, through the ability ‘to cobble together a subjectively workable narrative from ideas and memories available to the person’ (King et al. 2012: 446). Slater’s recourse to epilepsy can thus be understood as standing in for what cannot be recalled directly about her relationship with her mother and Morley’s obsession with Joy Division can be seen as a way of producing a self that can recover from trauma.

This idea of ‘cobbling together’ comes from Lévi-Strauss’s conceptualization of bricolage: ‘the “bricoleur” addresses himself (sic) to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 19), and out of which, for Lévi-Strauss, the bricoleur might produce something that achieves ‘brilliant unforeseen results’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 7). The selves produced in such texts are necessarily both real in the sense that they are the identity narratives of real historical subjects, and also new formations of identity, dependent on and, paradoxically, limited by their textual construction. These texts are wholly aware that identity construction is neither simply fictive nor non-fictive in any straightforward way. As Paul Eakin terms it, they contribute to ‘our endless

fashioning of identity narratives, our performance of the autobiographical act' (Eakin 2008: 154). These ideas and approaches are central to our analytical and critical engagement with music and memoir.

Music memoir as an emerging genre

This is one way in which the recent spate of music memoirs from musicians of the punk and post-punk era, and other contributors to that culture might be understood as an emerging genre. Music and its attendant cultures, for these writers, are already forms through which they 'cobble together' new selves from the fragments and stuff around them. Music and its cultures are the material through which new identity narratives are fashioned. Music is also a form through which the ineffable can be approached obliquely – a way in which to express that which has been otherwise inexpressible. This is evident in Paul Morley's aforementioned recourse to playful music journalism, which creates something beautiful and restorative from the inexpressible trauma of his father's death.

Musical texts are not contained within a fiction/non-fiction dichotomy either. Pop songs, music and performance are more generally understood as expressive arts. Musical identities (both that of the fan and the musician) and their expression through such things as dress are understood as a form of self-fashioning. Both can be seen as autobiographical acts. The producers of these memoirs might already, therefore, be understood as bricoleurs and their memoirs contribute as further acts of bricolage. As texts their interest is triple-fold; they are producing accounts of a significant history of innovative self-creation, they are developing the form of that self-creation further in their own textual strategies and they create the conditions for their readers to insert and develop their own

identity narratives in relation to them. In terms of scholarship and criticism, these processes necessitate new methodological paradigms.

Music, Memory and Memoir

The approach taken in *Music, Memory and Memoir* (forthcoming 2019) is one that, as indicated by the title, moves between that which is transient and seemingly contingent in personal memory, and that which is fixed in textual form via the memoir. This is the irony of the latter in that it reflects the inevitably fractured nature of memory whilst fixing it forever in a moment of time; a moment of personal recollection that has an umbilical connection to the general. Since its inception popular music has served this function in analytical terms:

In the next piece, we return to the world of juvenile pop music; and I do not apologize for re-introducing this theme, because it does seem to me that the teenager is a key figure for understanding the 1950s, and that song is, and always has been, a key indication of the culture of a society.

(MacInnes 1961: 48)

As MacInnes suggests in *England, Half English*, the relationship between culture and song is fundamental, in these terms in an emergent youth culture. It seems somewhat appropriate that MacInnes' journalism would influence his 'creative' work in writing *Absolute Beginners* (1959) that would in turn become the basis for the Julien Temple film *Absolute Beginners* (1986). Temple's work suggests that the dominant mood of the late 1980s was nostalgia; in particular a Technicolor 'movie nostalgia' featuring the 'authentic' presence of David Bowie (Billy Bragg also consciously used *England, Half English* as an album title [2002]). It is this aesthetic, which informs the majority of contemporary music memoirs, and this indicates a fundamental link between concept and

form and between form and aesthetic. This has been the nature of popular music from its conception. As Richard Hoggart identifies:

Some features of songs and singing amongst the working classes illustrate better than anything else both their contact with older traditions and their capacity for assimilating and modifying new material to their established interests (Hoggart 1957: 147).

Hoggart's comments on the nature of music cultures that develop from 'below' apply to memoirs that emerge from artists who generally work in equivalent subcultural groupings. This is either the indie artist with concomitant independence or the major artist, such as Bruce Springsteen, who arguably opposes the mainstream politically, despite their corporate 'stadium' success.

Popular music from its conception is one that is tied to community in the form of distinct social groups and sub groups. This is the essence of the indie/DIY aesthetic inherent in the contemporary music memoir. That which is independent of the mainstream, as comprehensively defined by Fonarow (2006), has the ability to be assimilated and modified. The pattern of engaging with popular music identified in the 1950s continues.

Punk

Our methodology centres on an understanding that the memoirs in question are speaking back to an older and quite specific aesthetic. These are texts that are self-consciously reworking and evoking the DIY aesthetic and paradoxical stylistic approaches associated with punk and subsequently evolved in indie and alternative. Dick Hebdige' attempts the difficult job of defining a series of aesthetic features that are ironically unified by their liminal contradictions and spaces. Hebdige argues that punk subculture is characterized by a desire for subversion. This takes form in a series of challenges to traditional

oppositional power and the growing corporatism and gentrification evident in 1970s glam and progressive rock.

[Punk should] dispense with musical pretensions and substitute, in the traditional romantic terminology, 'passion' for 'technique', the language of the common man for the arcane posturings of the existing elite, the now familiar armoury of frontal attacks for the bourgeois notion of entertainment or the classical concept of high art (Hebdige 2002: 110).

Just as the contemporary music memoir challenges the epistemological certainty and linear chronology found in conventional autobiography or positivist historiography, punk seeks to assert a similar challenge to the established aesthetics of popular music. The contemporary music memoir celebrates gaps over wholeness, textual process over the authority of representation, the particular over the panoramic and fluidity over fixedness. As these are textual experiments, it is useful to look to what Hebdige reveals about the language employed in fanzine culture. Perhaps punk's original act of memorialization, the fanzine is a text that wears its sutures openly. It too is a process of bricolage. Hebdige cites the visual aping of poison pen letters and graffiti and describes writing that provides 'opposition to dominant definitions', 'alternative critical space' and, crucially, 'ironic self-abasement' (Hebdige 2002: 111). The contemporary music memoir does not seek to clarify or justify a life well lived or the grand artistic achievements of a god like musician. Instead, it revisits and reworks these formal and narrative constructs. In these texts, the self is 'cohered elliptically through a chain of conspicuous absences [and] characterised by its unlocatedness and its blankness' (Hebdige 2002: 112).

Tracey Thorn's memoir, *Bedsit Disco Queen* exemplifies much of this. Thorn emerged in the late 1970s from the British post-punk scene first as a member of the

Marine Girls and then as half of the duo, *Everything But the Girl*. Her musical practice and identity fashioning reflect the revolutionary post-punk moment when a whole generation could refashion themselves through musical practice and culture:

It has been repeated so often that it is now a cliché, but it is a fact that punk groups, like no other groups before them, inspired in those of a certain age the conviction and desire to take part in what was happening rather than simply to watch and listen [...] But after 1977 it seemed there was no need to fanny around wasting time on things like practising, or honing your craft – you could just buy an instrument, get together with anyone else who had one and go out and do a gig (Thorn 2013: 31).

Thorn chronicles her own self-construction through ‘Do It Yourself’ (Thorn 2013: 31) culture. She is transformed through fandom; ‘[s]o at some point in June 1977, [...], I discovered punk, and it triggered in me a passion for pop music and a record-buying spree which was new and obsessive’ (Thorn 2013: 8). She plays with identity, constructing it self-consciously through dress as bricolage and self-fashioning; ‘[s]ixties-style round-neck jumpers from The Spastics Society shop. An old khaki mac, tightly belted and worn with stilettos to emulate a photo I have on my wall of Jean Shrimpton’ (Thorn 2013: 39). The music of *The Marine Girls* becomes a way of expressing or forming a new self out of dissatisfaction with other socially and culturally available identities; ‘[t]he dripping sarcasm of these lyrics was not subtle, and showed that we were growing up now, and getting very fed up with the limitations of femininity, or at least the version of it that seemed to be on offer to us’ (Thorn 2013: 54).

Thorn’s memoir is a chronicle of her self-creation at a particular historical moment when new forms of identity narrative became available through punk and post-punk cultural and material practices. But the textual strategies of the memoir can also be

seen as performing a similar kind of self-construction. Thorn acknowledges from the outset that her life story does not adhere to the trajectory of more conventional accounts, '[t]he career I've had has been one that's existed mostly on the margins' (Thorn 2013: ix). And it is through marginalia that she first challenges the kind of 'simplification' (Thorn 2013: 3) that journalists have given of her life story. In order to challenge this account she turns to her teenage diaries. These diaries present a much more fragmented and fractured emergence of a punk music fan than journalistic accounts, and are themselves works of bricolage, '[t]here are scribbled love hearts, stickers, extra bits of paper taped in with now dried-out, yellowed Sellotape and so many asterisks and exclamation marks it's like trying to read Braille' (Thorn 2013: 5). Identity, for the memoir, is put together through fragmentary bits and pieces, as it is for post-punk 'Do It Yourself' techniques of self-creation. Thorn does not attempt to produce a coherent or entirely knowable whole from these fragments. Returning to the former selves of the diaries is like having a stranger revealed to her. She does not remember her concerns with boys or the trivial stuff of the weather and hair washing that the diaries chronicle. She sees instead 'a work-in-progress' (Thorn 2013: 5). Marginalia is used throughout the memoir in the form of song lyrics, photos of homemade tapes, concert tickets and flyers. This reproduces the style of the teenage diaries and the bricolage of charity shop dressing, where bits and pieces are stuck together to fashion identity. The self of the memoir is similarly unfinished and still a work-in-progress. Thorn confirms that the self is temporarily incoherent and multiple, 'there are moments in the telling when timings shift about a bit; the age I say I am "now" isn't always consistent. I've let the inconsistencies stand. You're a grown-up, I know you won't mind' (Thorn 2013: 360).

American punk icon Patti Smith's memoir *M-Train* organizes itself along similarly fluid lines. Smith's textual self is unrooted in time and space. She moves from her present in downtown Manhattan to her years of happy marriage in Detroit via a series of unusual cultural encounters in places as divergent as Scandinavia, France and East Asia. Like Thorn, Smith's text operates as bricolage. Her stories are communicated through poetic prose, dream like recollection, photography and lengthy interrogations of her literary heroes, Rimbaud and Genet. Smith's musical self is made up of all of these things. She wears her influences overtly and the text frequently comes back to artistic process. Objects and spatial configurations operate simultaneously as evidence of material culture and symbolic pathways to temporal elasticity. Cafes, hotel rooms and the cluttered personal museum that is her Greenwich Village apartment shape Smith and her writing.

Occasionally I write directly into my small laptop, sheepishly glancing over to the shelf where my typewriter with its antiquated ribbon sits next to an obsolete Brother word processor. A nagging allegiance prevents me from scrapping either of them. Then there are the scores of notebooks, their contents calling – confession, revelation, endless variations of the same paragraph – and piles of napkins scrawled with incomprehensible rants. Dried-out ink bottles, encrusted nibs, cartridges for pens long gone, mechanical pencils emptied of lead. Writer's debris (Smith 2015: 27).

Smith, like fellow punks and post-punk memoirists Viv Albertine (2014), Carrie Brownstein (2015), [Kristin Hersh \(2010\)](#) and [Kim Gordon \(2015\)](#), is interested in much more than simply recounting her life's formative moments, name dropping or settling scores. These writers seek to explore what makes them artists and how their relationship with sound overlaps and comingles with language and memory. Boundaries between the senses and creative streams are investigated and undermined. The focus on process

distinguishes these texts from the likes of Keith Richards whose gargantuan autobiography *Life* (2010) attempts a linear panorama. The texts we are interested in adopt a deliberate stance very much in opposition to such narrative conventions.

Indie

Taking its lead from punk, indie music's considered aesthetic is distinct from the mainstream. Much of the existing cultural scholarship on indie reveals why the scene's quasi luminaries author so many of these texts. Ryan Hibbett addresses indie's desire to disrupt 'notions of social class, industry politics and aesthetics' (Hibbett 2005: 55). Such terms 'are operative as much as they are responsive, providing an occasion for distinction valuable on both ends of the commercial and artistic chain' (Hibbett 2005: 55). It is the notion of distinction rather than subversion that encapsulates indie's aesthetic and demonstrates how the scene evolved from punk. Indie fans locate their cultural self through a 'desire for social differentiation' (Hibbett 2005: 55), which manifests itself in various forms of outsidership. Communicating indie selfhood signifies that the subject is 'independent of economic and political forces as well as the value systems and aesthetic criteria of large scale production' (Hibbett 2005: 56). This is Beck's 'loser' or Radiohead's 'creep'. It is the nihilistic teenager who finds solace in Kurt Cobain's pain or Norman Blake's spectacles. It is the dichotomy between the artistic resistance of the indie label and the aggressive corporatism of the major. Outsidership becomes a force for celebration and the basis for subculture. Or, as Michael Azerrad writes in his love letter to American indie *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, indie aesthetics and ethics are 'not just attractive but a downright moral imperative' (Azerrad 2001: 6).

Hans Frese argues that foundational American indie artists such as Dinosaur Jr and Sonic Youth embrace a 'fundamental dichotomy' between 'ironic, self reflexive impetus' and the 'corporeal, energetic thrust of rock in its most brutish form' (Frese 2017: 24). Indie allows its listeners to construct themselves in terms of mind and body. Intellectualism holds equal billing with the visceral simplicities of rocking out. Jon Fine's memoir of his years as lead guitarist in indie also rans, Bitch Magnet. *Your Band Sucks*, details the band's genesis in a college scene in which 'long coats', 'faded denim' and 'army surplus jackets' were a way to 'avoid having a look' (Fine 2015: 20). Record collecting and left wing debate dominate discourse and wilful obscurity marks an ironic and paradoxical notion of success and authenticity. Naïve as this sort of posturing undoubtedly is, Fine's text is driven by a love for the intellectual purity of the scene. Terrible touring conditions and sweaty flea bitten venues are always preferable to the corporate hell of the arena. Connoisseurship and cultural debate offer a shibboleth to the subculture. However, these intellectual constructions only tell part of the story. Fine also writes about the physical nature of his music. Sound and noise move beyond the merely auditory. 'I wanted to play and hear music that was physically involving', he explains, music that is 'loud enough to feel it' and that will 'grab your throat and squeeze until you struggle to breathe' with a 'final chord [...] like a piano falling from a skyscraper' (Fine 2015: 101). Intellectualism and membership only make sense when the music has such enormous power.

Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon also addresses this experiential duality. *Girl in a Band* details Gordon's wide range of cultural, philosophical and aesthetic influences. She too writes her cultural self as bricoleur. As Sonic Youth gather momentum in the early

1980s, Gordon absorbs the richness of New York's art world. The cultural space of the art gallery informs the recording studio and the gig venue. Gordon's fascination with architecture means that she describes song writing in terms of spatial construction. Yet, despite this intricate detailing of her cultural influences, Gordon stresses that none of this would matter without her intimate relationship with sound and noise.

From the beginning, music for me was visceral [...] I wanted deliverance, the loss of myself, the capacity to be *inside* that music. It was the same power and sensation you feel when a wave takes you up and pushes you someplace else (Gordon 2015: 146).

What both of these examples demonstrate is that external cultural influences spar and blend with memories of music's immediate visceral power. The former are perhaps easier to rationalize and recollect whereas the latter are much harder to capture in language. The ways that the body experiences sound lie beneath language and so the memoirist turns to innovation and experimentation. Much in our musical memories resists rational linearity and so the memoir form as we define it here offers an opportunity to investigate how such phenomenon is communicated.

The extramusical

Exploring the fractious relationship between music and language is a core aspect of our research. If engagement with the life stories of musicians helps us to construct our own cultural self, then it is key to address the slippery interface between the abstractions of sound and the narrative processes made possible in language. Leon Botstein differentiates between 'music logic' and 'the struggle with describing it in language' (Botstein 2000: 531) and argues for an understanding of nostalgia that has roots in music as both listening experience and cultural phenomenon. The 'transaction between listener and performer' relies on the 'ascription of meaning in listening' as much as 'the function of musical

memory in a given culture' (Botstein 2000: 532). Music as purely sonic experience resists narrativization. Its abstractions are beyond language. Tia DeNora, explains that music is, 'perpetually capable of eluding attempts to pin it to semantic corollaries' (DeNora 1986: 84). The memoirist cannot write sound and the fan cannot shape conscious memory of sound. This creates the need for an extramusical turn. This term is defined here as the ephemera and material culture that surrounds musical production, performance and engagement. Each of our chosen texts makes extensive comment on the material world around them as a means of evoking and constructing memory. This includes the performance space, the album cover, the fanzine and the evocative photography of figures such as grunge chronicler Charles Peterson. The music produced by boutique labels such as Warp or 4AD is unthinkable without the sleeve designs that accompany it. Hidden away in most music fans' spare rooms are boxes of tickets or flyers while sweat stained t-shirts lurk at the back of wardrobes. Increasingly, these hidden objects are becoming front and centre. Record Store Day, for example, is an opportunity to display our cultural tastes and sophistication through, firstly, the purchases and then through our communication of said purchases on social media. The so-called vinyl revival is as much about the tangible nature of the format as it is about the sounds contained within the grooves. Crate digging helps us to rebuild a lost cultural self as the contemporary and remembered become blurred in a palimpsest of materiality, memory and selfhood. These objects are sites of narrative and add clarity to the shapelessness of remembered sound. Cultural and musical identity is constructed from a bricolage of such material objects and we seek the same in the texts that we read. Memoirs such as Richard King's record shop recollections *Original Rockers* (2015) and Tim Burgess' paean to crate digging *Tim Book*

Two (2016) construct cultural selves through buying and collecting. The physical record opens up memories of time, space and place. The contemporary music memoir is as much a story of subjectivity among extramusical culture as it is a record of sonic production. As such, the memoir is an act of curatorship. It brings together snippets of existing text in diary form, newspaper review, song lyrics and photography. Among these **artefacts**, new and creative opportunities open up. These are opportunities that are self-aware regarding the process of constructing the self through memory and the nostalgic object.

Reading nostalgia

Our research establishes some key critical connections and addresses central questions. If the memoirs under discussion are reworking an aesthetic from two decades ago then we need to examine why this is. Such construction of personal and cultural memory goes beyond simple nostalgia. These are texts that are looking backwards and simultaneously interrogating this very process. . This is a radical form of historical engagement that shifts between self-awareness and the unconscious. Punk and indie resist simplicity and linearity in their musical incarnation and our chosen subjects and creative contributors do the same. Our job is to establish what the cultural and literary conditions are for this to take place. Despite the self-aware nature of these texts, we cannot ignore the tidal wave of nostalgia that is so visible in the contemporary market place. The music industry seems determined to sell us our own memories neatly packaged in brand new gatefold releases or glossy hardback editions. Recently, fans have filled venues to watch a seemingly endless list of reformed indie greats such as Pixies, and Ride. They have been able to see bands play entire classic albums. Mudhoney have played *Superfuzz Bigmuff*, The Wedding Present has toured the world performing *George Best* and Teenage Fanclub

has revisited *Bandwagonesque*. BBC 6 Music asks us to don ill-fitting old clothes on 'wear your band t-shirt to work day' and newly invigorated record stores are selling more vinyl than they have done in twenty years.

Music journalist **Simon Reynolds**, explains that the new century's nostalgic impulses are clear in processes of 'rampant recycling, bygone genres revived and renovated [and] vintage sonic material reprocessed and recombined' (Reynolds 2010: 10). The term 'retro' is, he argues, one that 'refers to self-conscious fetish for period stylization [...] expressed creatively through pastiche and citation' (Reynolds 2010: 11). Reynolds offers a broad range of explanations for this new fascination with the old. These range from 'YouTube's gigantic collective archive' to the iPod and its use as 'personal oldies radio station' (Reynolds 2010: 13). More relevant to our work, however, is a line of critical thinking that speaks to notions of audience. Reynolds describes the 'natural greying of rock music' and the manner in which the music fan's 'fascination for fads, sounds and stars' comes out of those that 'occurred within living memory' (Reynolds 2010: 13). This reworking of the past is distinct from cultural historicism in its ties to the mass market and consumerism. The music consumer is asked to 'feel pangs for the products of yesteryear, the novelties and distractions that filled up our youth' (Reynolds 2010: 14). This suggests that there is a specific market and audience for reworkings of the immediate past. Those of us who spent our youth sweating in tiny venues are now being offered the chance to relive the experience in arenas. Rather than worrying about missing the last train home, we are now concerned with making sure we are back in time to pay the babysitter.

Given the nature of our methodological approach to this research, it is appropriate here to add some personal details regarding this editorial team. All three of us are in our middle age and our scholarly interest in music, culture and text is grounded in our own nostalgic fandom. Our own teenage years were spent in sweaty gig rooms in North London, Yorkshire and Manchester and our editorial meetings wander off into the very reverie we intend to investigate. Our research and writing on Ian Curtis, *Throwing Muses* and *The Senseless Things* is rooted in our own subjective memories. We are fans of contemporary music but find ourselves making comparisons with the Goth, post-punk and underground artists we idolized two or three decades ago. Perhaps this comes out of a need for temporary escape from our adult responsibilities or busy professional lives or it might be as simple as a longing for a simpler time. It is most likely a combination of these things. It is clear that disengaging from our own nostalgic impulses so that we can remain analytical and objective is an academic fantasy. When we read the memoirs and texts that form the basis of this work, we are involved in several processes at once. We are, in Rosi Braidotti's terms, engaging in 'nomadic' intellectual activity:

The nomadic consciousness combines coherence with mobility. It aims to rethink the unity of the subject, without reference to humanistic beliefs, without dualistic oppositions, linking instead body and mind in a new set of intensive and often intransitive transitions (Braidotti 1994: 31).

Superficially, we are enjoying fine writing and opportunities to demystify the artistic personas held within each book. As already outlined, these are texts in which constructions of subjectivity and selfhood are playfully and consistently reworked, challenged and undermined. This is endlessly interesting as fans and as academics working with text and context. But there is a subtler process happening that speaks to

these texts specifically and to the culture of looking back more broadly. We argue that engagement with these texts is an opportunity to enter into the same playful engagement with cultural identity. We can objectify our previous selves and interrogate the manner in which we develop taste, aesthetic appreciation and forms of cultural capital. The texts we read adopt a literary approach and target a culturally literate audience. Our subjects are multidisciplinary artists who work across different forms of 'text' and engage in multidisciplinary practice. 'Cultural authors' are therefore constructing their own identity through constructing their own past for a readership who are in turn constructing their own past in the music and identity of the musician. This is a literate artist writing for a literate audience.

Memoir not historiography

In this research, we are careful in making clear distinctions between the memoir and more formal modes found in music historiography. Historiography's roots are often in a journey of sorts and whilst memoirs often have personal journey at their core this is not the cohesive journey of, say, the classical grand tour (Chaney 1998) where there is an associated function in 'coming of age' and where the physical journey echoes the rite of passage. This is the dominant mode of expression of popular music history. The very mechanisms of popular music force this attention to narrative progression in this manner; rock family trees, label histories and musicians leaving one group to form another. In these terms the fragmentary nature of the personal narrative becomes essential when placed against the broader cultural narrative presented by popular music and the corporate machinery that surrounds it. The personal narrative of the 'artist' becomes that which has to be critiqued and the critic cannot ignore their connection to the event, artist

or song. This is where the memoirist and theorist are fundamentally different from the cultural historian; the living through, or being part of an event or movement is the socio-critical core of this methodological approach. An historiographic approach to memory is something developed and used in Memory Studies (Sage 2010 onwards). The development of memory studies is significant in recognizing and unpicking how histories have been created partly through distortion and fabrication and narrativization (Dutceac Segesten and Wustenberg 2016). The creation of 'legend' is important in establishing the relationship between the individual and the collective where the artist or band functions as a signifier. In a specific venue there is a status attached to the group by virtue of the space but this can extend to their performance in charts, by their social standing, etc.

'Legend' is not purely conferred by the concert or the venue but by a complex interrelationship of the physical space, the events that happen within, and the legacy of the event that continues after. The split between the creative and critical has emerged in an almost Cartesian sense. This is something identified by Theodor Adorno:

Music today, like all other expressions of the objective spirit, is accused of creating a schism between the intellectual and the physical, between the work of the mind and that of the hands: the guilt of privilege – Hegel's dialectic of master and servant – is extended [...] to the sovereign spirit dominant over nature (Adorno 2007: 14).

In these terms the emotive wins out in collapsing the dialectic between intellectual objectification and subjective engagement. There has been a collapse of the critical and the creative where the latter can be an equivalent mode of interrogation, or perhaps an 'authentic' mode of addressing/interrogating a subject. The creative form itself holds a form of truth in its inability to capture the past in a coherent manner; '[t]he ethical imperative to "get it right"' and tell the truth about one's life is continually thwarted by

the form of writing itself' (Pleasance 2015: 71). This is a facet of the music memoir that is compounded by the playful nature of the musician/memoirists:

I thought it was hilarious when Ben Pritchard did that interview with Anthony Meirion for the unofficial Fall website, blabbing his heart out. It reminded me of one of those memoirs that politicians love writing: Ben Pritchard: *The Fall Years, 2001-2006*.

(Smith 2009: 1)

This paradigm is inevitably the same for the critic: an anthropological approach does not work. A suitable methodology being employed in the consideration of music memoirs in these terms is then one that recognizes the historiographic and the function of cultural history, particularly in respect of the reader. The writers in *Music, Memory and Memoir* are commenting on a phenomenon about which the audience will already have a connection and it does not matter if they were not 'there'. This is a mode of interrogation employed by the artists themselves; a core feature of the contemporary music memoir is one where the artist presents themselves as fan and, vitally and honestly, as unreliable.

Finding a methodology

The approach undertaken in *Music, Memory and Memoir* is one discussed in *Writing Otherwise: Experiments in Cultural Criticism* (Stacey and Wolff 2013). Where the mode of analysis recognizes and accepts narrative attention and at the same time narrative incoherence, '[t]olerance for incomplete stories may be tested. And where linearity precipitates the expectation of resolution [...]' (Stacey and Wolff 2013: 3). However, what is important is their assertion that there is still a recognizably academic quality to the interrogation and that there is a conscious placing of I in and amongst the subjects being considered. This is where the approach is solidified, not in a single simple definition, which can be applied but where there is recognition of different forms of

writing, this in turn suggesting a spectrum of forms that have a unifying approach. These might be summarized as:

- Relationality – as the position of the writer in relation to self and other in addition to or in opposition to an idealized self.
- A new language of expression – one that draws in the ethereal in attention to physical interaction (body language, smell, etc.) and intimacy.
- Uncertainty – as an inherent part of the process of dealing with the self in relation to the past and present. With this comes a collapse of the past and present in recognition of 'now' being an uneasy encapsulation of both.
- Identity – where the identity of the writer is challenged through the process of writing and analysis and this is acknowledge, either implicitly or explicitly.

The alignment of academic as fan and co-producer suggests an approach to ongoing research in which there is fluidity between artist, text and critic, with all of the above serving equivalent functions. The construction of the book *Music, Memory and Memoir* is one that embraces this approach and where the spectrum includes a contribution from a writer such as Nicola Spelman who considers Springsteen from an academic base, but where there is a conscious recognition that his writings are analysed from her position as member of the audience. This extends to writers such as Kimi Karki who analyses his own musical practice and Jon Stewart as the subject of a memoir (Wener 2011). For all of the academic contributors to the collection our personal relationship to our subject matter informs our academic response to it. This comes back to the kind of creative intellectualism suggested by Braidotti's idea of the nomadic. We utilize 'systems of

thought or conceptual frameworks that can help [...] think about change, transformation, living transitions. [...] A creative, nonreactive project, emancipated from the oppressive force of the traditional theoretical approach' (Braidotti 1994: 30). *Music, Memory and Memoir* is thus utilizing two methodologies in the same text and at the same time. The inevitable historical nature of original memoir has a historiographic function in locating the self (of the writer) and an individual, in a phenomenological sense, at the core of the (fractured) narrative. We combine this with an 'academic' or 'analytical' approach that inevitably has a similar function. Such writing is contingent on the academic's self within the text. This is not an experimental form of academic writing nor is it memoir. It is a form that is an inevitable result of the subject matter being discussed.

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