

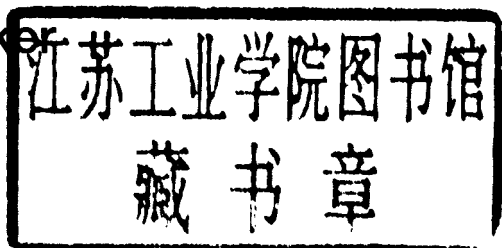
# Key Concepts in Popular Music

Roy Shuker

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# KEY CONCEPTS IN POPULAR MUSIC

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# INTRODUCTION

During 1996 hip-hop performers the Fugees' album *The Score* (Sony) sold more than 8.5 million copies world-wide, 4.2 million of them in their native United States alone; 'Killing Me Softly', a remake of Roberta Flack's 1973 hit and the second international single to be taken from *The Score*, went to number one in twelve countries and sold 2.4 million copies. In the same year, after every major US label had been bidding for the band, REM re-signed to Warner Brothers, securing the biggest record contract in history – an estimated \$80 million; UK 'girl group' the Spice Girls' 'Wannabe' (Virgin) became the most successful debut single of all time after selling 4.8 million copies world-wide; and the value of the UK music industry hit a new peak of £1.1 billion, while the value of the total recorded music market in the United States was \$12.5 billion. In February 1997, Peter Gabriel's CD-ROM *Eve* won the top prize at the four day Milla conference in Cannes, the computer equivalent of the Cannes film festival, which attracted 1,200 companies from 36 countries. At Milla, in a rare appearance, George Michael declared the Internet to be the future of the music industry; subsequently new media awards for UK music Web sites were launched by *Music Week* and its on-line sister magazine *dotmusic*.

Such events and statistics indicate the international commercial and cultural significance of popular music. Its global and ubiquitous presence is undeniable. We are exposed to its various forms through 'muzak' in shopping malls; on the streets and in

the parks with 'ghetto blasters' and Walkmans; on film soundtracks and in popular musicals; as music video through MTV and television; on the radio at home and work; in club culture; through the music press; and 'live' in a variety of settings, from the stadium concert to dance clubs.

In cultural terms, popular music is clearly of enormous importance in people's daily lives, and for some is central to their social identities. In economic terms, the products of the music industry still outweigh those of any other cultural industry, with income including not just the sales of recorded music, but also copyright revenue, tour profits, sales of the music press, musical instruments, and sound systems. For example, in 1992 Sony's recorded music sales alone, of \$3.8 billion, and Polygram/Philips' recorded music sales of \$3.7 billion, can be compared favourably with leading video game company Nintendo's total sales of \$5.5 billion (Sadler, 1994). The importance of music to the UK economy was revealed by a 1995 report on invisible exports (in this case primarily income from royalties), which showed they grossed \$2.25 billion in overseas receipts.

### **How are we to understand the term 'popular music'?**

The term 'popular music' defies precise, straightforward definition. Culturally, all popular music consists of a hybrid of musical traditions, styles, and influences. At the same time, it is an economic product which is invested with ideological significance by many of its consumers. In one sense, popular music encompasses any style of music that has a following, and would accordingly include many genres and styles which are largely excluded from this volume, most notably the various forms of classical music and jazz. Obviously the criteria for what counts as popular, and their application to specific musical styles and genres, are open to considerable debate. Record sales, concert attendance, numbers of performers, radio and television air play, are all quantifiable indicators of popularity, but classical music clearly has sufficient following to be considered popular while, conversely, some forms of popular music are quite exclusive (e.g. thrash metal). Further, many musical forms now cross over in

the market place, with distinctions between 'high' and 'low', or popular, culture increasingly blurred. Consider, for example, the highly commercial marketing of The Three Tenors, whose classical music has topped the 'pop' charts.

For the purposes of this study, I have largely followed conventional academic practice, equating 'popular music' with the main commercially produced and marketed musical genres, primarily in a Western context. I am conscious that this emphasis is open to charges of ignoring many significant forms of popular music, located primarily in non-Western settings, but boundaries were necessary to make the project viable. Further, Western styles of popular music continue to dominate the international market place, at the same time appropriating local musics or being absorbed by them. The emphasis is accordingly on traditional 'rock' and 'pop' forms, and their various derivative styles/genres, along with more recently prominent genres such as reggae, rap, 'world music', and the various dance musics. Styles such as jazz, blues, and gospel are only dealt with here in so far as they have fed into contemporary, mainstream popular music.

## **The state of popular music studies**

Popular music studies has become a growth area, and the field is now both extensive and highly active, with new emphases and agenda evident. The international music industry has changed, as have governmental attitudes towards supportive involvement in popular music as a cultural industry. The global music industry is no longer so dominated by the United States and Britain; it is less concerned with the production and management of commodities, and more with the management of rights. The conventional distinction between the major record companies and the independents has become blurred. The significance of the national, and questions of popular music and national cultural identity now tend to be subsumed under broader issues of the globalization of the culture industries and the tensions and communalities between the local and the global. The advent of new technologies of sound recording and reproduction, especially digital sampling, has fundamentally changed the way that popular music is produced and

consumed. Associated with this are issues of intellectual property rights, copyright, and the control of sounds. Concern has shifted from a focus on production and textual issues to a concern with consumption. Subcultural theory, once the dominant approach to the study of audiences, has been combined with greater attention to the concepts of scene and locality. The traditional emphasis on rock, pop, and soul as the major constituent genres in popular music, situated around particular notions of musical value, has given way to a proliferation of musical styles, with audiences splintering accordingly. While the historical tension between musicological and sociological approaches to popular music remains, it is being rethought through the reconceptualization of the politics of musical production: 'what's at issue is not which analytical technique better gets at music's "meaning", but how to account for the different musical experiences involved in making and hearing music' (Frith, in Straw *et al.*, 1995: iii). Embracing all of the above is a continued concern with popular music as cultural politics. I have tried to incorporate these new emphases, and capture something of the present diversity and complexity of popular music studies, in this volume.

### **Why this guide?**

The economic and cultural importance of popular music, and the enormous amount of popular and academic discourse surrounding it, suggests that an attempt to provide a guide to the terminology and concepts commonly applied to the field is timely. While there are a number of general studies which introduce students to many of the concepts used in the study of popular music, these 'definitions' are embedded within the general text, and thus are not always easily accessible to students. Further, such studies rarely include both sociological and musicological concepts, along with contextual and textual aspects of the topic. This volume seeks to provide, in accessible form, a comprehensive guide to the key terms and concepts present in the broad body of writing within popular music studies.

This is, obviously, an extremely ambitious undertaking. The study of popular music embraces aesthetics and musicology,

economics and sociology, and social psychology. It necessarily includes reference to the music industry, the creators of the music, its textual forms, the means whereby it is disseminated, and its reception and consumption. Further, these are active processes, which articulate and interact with one another. There is an obvious danger that dictionary definitions will be simply encapsulations of particular aspects of this complexity, rather than critical engagement with them. In too neatly labelling and packaging the field of popular music studies, there is the danger that students will treat concepts as tablets written in stone, rather than as a dynamic vocabulary which must be actively located within shifting contexts. Accordingly, the entries here must be regarded as introductions, designed to lead into fuller engagement with the concepts and terms; to this end, I have placed considerable emphasis on the extensive provision of key further reading, listening, and viewing sources.

## **Concepts and terms**

A concept is a general notion, or class of objects. The word is broadly interpreted here to mean general analytical framing labels; for example, genre is a concept, exemplified with various degrees of cohesion by genres such as rap, heavy metal, and grunge. The latter constitute terms. Terms are usually more specific and more descriptive of particular musical practices: locality is a concept, while specific local musical scenes can be considered terms, e.g. the Liverpool sound.

While the format of the book is alphabetical, there are identifiable 'sets' of related concepts. These have been written in a linked fashion, and need at times to be read this way. The broad groupings are:

- theoretical paradigms and the methodological approaches associated with them. Here I have included major social/cultural theories (the various 'isms', e.g. Marxism, feminism), along with aesthetics, cultural studies, ethnomusicology, and musicology. These are provided in very abbreviated fashion, as the main concern is with their application and utilization in



popular music studies. An interesting group of concepts, indicative of a relatively new emphasis in popular music studies derived from cultural geography, are locality, sounds, scenes, and identities. The main methodologies considered are semiotics, textual analysis, and ethnography.

- concepts and terminology associated with the study of the music industry. Prominent entries here include the operation of the music industry and its key 'cultural intermediaries' (e.g. A & R), market cycles, and the major and independent record companies. Topics such as the development of recording technology, the shifting status of formats, sampling, and copyright also fall within this group.
- popular music genres. There are approximately sixty of these identified here, with more extensive entries devoted to what can be considered the main popular music genres, including rock/rock'n'roll, pop, reggae, rap, dance-music, and heavy metal. The diversity of genres is indicative of the difficulties of defining popular music in any succinct and broadly acceptable manner. Genres defy static, academic definition independent of those making and listening to the music. Each entry includes reference to the historical development and musical characteristics of the genre, its other stylistic attributes, and some of its main performers. Examples of key or illustrative recordings are provided (usually giving their American pressing). Wherever possible, these are currently available in CD format. There is a marked tendency to situate genres simply by referring to exemplars, both artists and recordings. This device is both necessary and important, and I have used it here. However, a certain amount of caution is necessary given the circularity involved (genre X is illustrated by performer Y, who works within, and thereby defines, genre X). Where appropriate, major subgenres are also mentioned. Obviously, the treatment in this context can only be extremely cursory, serving to introduce each genre.

Excluded here are more traditional forms of popular music which can now be considered largely obsolete, and primarily of historical importance, for example music hall, black face minstrel, and vaudeville (though see Pearsall, 1975, 1976;

Pickering and Green, 1987). There are also a number of genres of 'world music', referred to under that meta genre, which could have been accorded separate treatment had space been available (e.g. rai, bossa nova, juju).

- musicians and the process of creating music. This group includes the range of terms applied to performers, most notably stars and auteurs, and the concepts which underpin the value judgements frequently applied to musicians and their musics (e.g. authenticity).
- modes of delivery and sites of reception (e.g. clubs), including formats, radio, the Internet, and MTV.
- consumption and audience-related terminology, such as taste cultures, fans, subcultures (e.g. punk), cultural capital, and identity.

What is consciously omitted? Specific individuals involved in the music industry, particularly musicians, are only mentioned as exemplars of concepts, for example Madonna is not an entry as such, but is used to illustrate aspects of stardom. More specialized musicological terms are excluded; they can be found in studies emphasizing a musicological approach. As already noted, many styles of 'world music' are excluded; they can be found in *World Music: The Rough Guide* (Broughton *et al.*, 1994).

As well as a table of contents, I have provided an alphabetical listing of the concepts. All cross references are in bold; sometimes the actual concept cross referenced may not be in the precise form in the entry.

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# KEY CONCEPTS

## A

**a capella**

**A & R (artists & repertoire)**

acid rock *see* psychedelic rock

**aesthetics**

**affect**

**aficionados**

Afro-American *see* black music

**albums; concept albums/rock operas; tribute albums;  
benefit albums**

**alternative rock/alternative music**

**alternative music scenes**

**ambient**

amplification *see* sound; sound recording

**appropriation; syncreticism**

**art rock**

**articulation**

**audiences; consumers**

**auteur; auteurship**

**authenticity**

**avant garde; experimental**

## **Key concepts**

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### **B**

baby boomers *see* demography

**back catalogue; reissues; boxed sets**

**beat; backbeat; rhythm; riff**

**beat music; British beat**

beatniks *see* counter culture

bebop *see* jazz

behaviourism *see* effects

**bhangra**

**black music; Afro-American**

**blue notes**

**bluegrass**

**blues: country blues; classic blues; jump blues; Chicago  
(electric) blues; British R & B/blues rock;  
contemporary blues**

**boogie-woogie**

**bootlegs**

**bricolage**

British beat: *see* beat music

**British invasion**

**Britpop**

broadcasting *see* MTV; radio; State

**bubblegum**

### **C**

**call and response**

**cassette audio tape; cassette tape players; cassette  
culture; home taping**

**CD (compact disc)**

**CD-ROMs; multimedia; ROMagazines**

**Celtic music**

**censorship; New Right; Parents' Music Resource  
Center**

**charts**

**chords; chord extensions; dominant chords**

**Christian rock**

**class**

classic rock *see* rock  
**clubs; club culture; club scene**  
 cock rock *see* hard rock  
**commodification**  
**communication**  
**concentration**  
 concept albums *see* albums  
**concerts; mega events**  
**consumer sovereignty**  
**consumption**  
 content quotas *see* State  
**copyright**  
**counter culture/underground; beats; hippies**  
**country; C & W/country & western; country rock**  
 cover bands *see* musicians  
**cover versions; song families**  
**crossover**  
**cultural capital**  
**cultural imperialism**  
**culture industries; entertainment industries**  
**cultural intermediaries**  
 cultural policy *see* State cultural policy  
**cultural studies**  
**culture; mass culture/society; popular culture**  
 curriculum *see* education

## D

**dance; dancing**  
**dance music; dance-music: jungle; house; trip-hop;**  
     **drum'n'bass**  
**dance pop**  
**deadheads**  
**demography; baby boomers; Generation X**  
 deregulation *see* State cultural policy  
**disco**  
**discourse analysis**  
**DJ**

## **Key concepts**

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**doo-wop**

drum'n'bass *see* dance-music

**Dunedin sound**

## **E**

**education: curriculum; pedagogy; school commitment**

**effects; 'rock suicides'**

**enculturation**

entertainment industries *see* cultural industries

EPs *see* singles

**ethnicity; race**

**ethnography; participant observation**

**ethnomusicology**

experimental *see* avant garde

## **F**

**fans; fandom**

**fanzines**

**fashion**

**feminism**

**festivals**

**fiction**

**film: Hollywood musicals; popular/rock musicals;**

**youth movies; rockumentaries; soundtracks**

FM radio *see* radio

**folk culture; folk music; folk rock**

**Fordism; post-Fordism**

formats *see* radio; record formats

**Frankfurt School**

functional music *see* muzak

**funk**

## **G**

**garage bands; garage rock**

**gatekeepers**

**gender**

Generation X *see* demography

**genre; meta genres; subgenres**

**geography**

**girl groups**

**glam rock; glitter rock**

**globalization**

**gospel**

**goth/gothic rock; goths**

gramophone *see* phonograph

**grunge**

**H**

**hard rock; cock rock; stadium rock**

**hardcore**

**harmony**

**heavy metal**

**hegemony**

**high culture**

hip-hop *see* rap

hippies *see* counter culture

**history; social history (of popular music)**

Hollywood musicals *see* film

home taping *see* cassette audio tape

**homology**

**hook**

house music *see* dance-music

**I**

**identity**

**independents/indies; indie music**

**Internet; World Wide Web**

**J**

**jazz; bebop; jazz rock/fusion; acid jazz**

jungle *see* dance-music



## Key concepts

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### L

labelling theory *see* moral panic

lifestyle *see* taste cultures

### listening

live performance *see* performance

### Liverpool sound/Merseybeat

locality; local scenes; local sounds

lyric analysis

### M

### majors

making music *see* musicians

### managers

### Manchester sound

### market cycles

### marketing; retail

### Marxism

mass culture/society *see* culture

### mediation

mega events *see* concerts

### melody

### memorabilia

meta genre *see* genre

### mods

moral panic; labelling theory

### Motown

MTV *see* music video

multimedia *see* CD-ROMs

music industry; record companies

music press; music journalism; music magazines

music video; MTV

### musicals

musicians; making music; cover bands; tribute bands;  
session musicians

### musicology

### muzak