NOTE TO USERS

"GETTING BEYOND"

SPIN MAGAZINE IN THE LATE 1980S

Kevin John Bozelka
Department of Art History and Communication Studies
McGill University, Montréal
August 2004

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in Communications.

Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Canada

Abstract

The Eighties were a time in Western popular music that seemed to exist only by virtue of it coming after something else – namely, the 1960s counterculture and the punk rock of the 1970s. Inheriting both the failure of permanent cultural revolution and the intense cynicism that is punk's strongest legacy, youth cultures in the 1980s found it increasingly difficult to live in the present. This thesis labels this historical dilemma postmodern. It will show how *SPIN* magazine attempted to move past this dilemma in order to assert a unique identity for 1980s popular music and youth cultures. In particular, John Leland, a columnist for *SPIN*, appropriated a pop aesthetic as an identity marker and, in the process, questioned the supposed ineffectiveness of pop music for a political postmodernism. An analysis of Leland's writing uncovers what accounts of this era tend to ignore: the social function of postmodernism.

RÉSUMÉ

Les années quatre-vingts étaient une époque dans la musique populaire de l'ouest qui a semblé exister seulement en vertu d'il venant après quelque chose d'autre – à savoir, la contre-culture des 1960s et le punk rock des 1970s. Hériter les deux l'échec de révolution culturelle permanente et le cynisme intense qui est le legs le plus fort de punk, la jeunesse des 1980s l'a trouvé de plus en plus difficile à habiter le présent. Cette thèse désigne ce dilemme historique sous le nom de postmoderne. Elle montrera comment la revue *SPIN* a tenté de déplacer au-delà de ce dilemme afin d'affirmer une identité unique pour la musique populaires et la jeunesse des 1980s. En particulier, John Leland, un chroniqueur pour *SPIN*, approprié une esthétique pop comme un marque d'identité et, dans le procédé, questionné l'inefficacité présumée de la musique pop pour un postmodernism politique. Une analyse de l'écriture de Leland découvre ce que les comptes de cette époque ont tendance à négliger: la fonction sociale de postmodernism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Popular music scholars have consistently enlisted the terminology of semiotics in their efforts to explain the function of the music press. Deena Weinstein, for one, has stated that "magazines freeze the signifiers of a subculture, allowing them to be learned and absorbed" (175). Simon Frith has described how teenagers use certain magazines to consume an experience that "articulates their present sense of being young – and the critics' job is to find the records which are the signs of that experience, to explain how they work as signs" (*Sound Effects* 177). And in an analysis of a feature on The Specials written by Frith, Roy Shuker has shown how critics "situate new product via constant appeal to referents" (93).

At stake in all this semiotic activity is history. Magazines freeze those subcultural signifiers into a history that can be learned and absorbed. Teenagers page through magazines in search of the tools with which to make their mark on history. And the new product that gets reviewed within is constantly situated in a historical context. Shuker's allusion to critics as "arbiters of cultural history" is thus apt (92). Critics consolidate a particular history of popular music by "defining the reference points" for a reader who "both discovers the 'history' and assimilates a selective tradition" (Shuker 96-97).

But by the 1980s, critics were finding it difficult to tame semiotic activity into a historical understanding of popular music. The increased digitalization of musical production in the 1980s, for instance, was to a large degree responsible for charging the atmosphere with floating signifiers. Samplers like the Synclavier II ripped sounds out of their historical contexts and sifted them throughout temporary foster homes. Roger Linn's LM-1 drum machine surpassed previous programmable units such as the Roland TR808 by providing samples of real

acoustic percussion, locking history into an endless loop. This eternal musical return was most pronounced in the production of black music where LeRoi Jones' concept of the "changing same" gave way to the "changing *exact* same" or, more cynically, "*un*changing same" of hip-hop and myriad strains of post-disco dance music.[1] And, of course, there were repercussions on the side of consumption as well. Compact discs encouraged the widespread emptying out of back catalogs in a ceaseless flood of reissues and, especially, box sets that offered the illusion of historical completeness.

More to the point, popular music was old enough by the 1980s that its very history could now impede historical understanding. The 1980s were a time in Western popular music that seemed to exist only by virtue of it coming after something else. Critics obsessively doted on two bygone cataclysms in particular, repeating them ad nauseum in a metanarrative of field-clearing epistemological breaks – the 1960s counterculture and punk. The more nagging and omnipresent antecedent was, of course, the counterculture of the 1960s which recruited its huge demographic from the Baby Boom of the two previous decades. This is the generation that formed the ideology of what came to be known as rock, a music distinguishable from rock and roll and, certainly, pop. Rock set itself off from these previous incarnations of popular music by aspiring to the status of serious music and supposedly inoculating itself against the vagaries of commercialism.[2] These were precisely the qualities hippies, Yippies, White Panthers, etc. sought to help mobilize their historical strength in numbers towards a socialist utopia and the music necessarily became central to their

---

[1] LeRoi Jones, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," in *Black Music* (New York: Apollo Editions, 1968), 180-221.

[2] Indeed, one way musicians went about achieving serious status was by fusing rock and roll with classical music (the progressive rock of Yes and Emerson, Lake and Palmer) and jazz, which was almost as highbrow as classical by the 1970s (the brass-heavy Chicago and Earth, Wind & Fire).

subjectivity. But the failure of various countercultural moments (May 1968 France, 1969 Woodstock) to produce this entirely new culture served as the precursor to an environment where the very possibility of change was continually doubted. Charles Manson perverted the deep textual analyses rock seemed to engender (especially The Beatles, previously host to harmless "Paul Is Dead" interpretations juiced from every little nook of their oeuvre). The carnage at the free concert at Altamont in 1969 proved that rock offered no guarantee of social harmony. And as the 1960s hobbled into the 1970s on the heels of these tragedies, many members of the counterculture drifted into the Establishment they once sought to overthrow and fortified themselves against disillusionment, if not hypocrisy, with an active, willed denial of change. History itself had frozen, complicating the attempt to freeze popular music's signifiers.

Nowhere was this drift into calcification more evident in popular music discourse than in *Rolling Stone* magazine, the biggest selling music magazine in America. Kicking off publication in the canonical year of 1967, *Rolling Stone* pushed its way to the forefront of publications espousing the ideology of rock such as *Crawdaddy* or *Creem*. But as the magazine became increasingly dependent upon the record business, not only for advertising revenue but for offsetting general operating expenses as well, it failed to maintain its own distance from the vagaries of commercialism. As Frith notes, by 1971, *Rolling Stone* became an integral part of the record business's machinations, delivering a most desirable market to their advertisers – "twenty to thirty-five years old, mostly male, white, affluent, interested in rock even as they settled and lost their youthful fanaticism" (*Sound Effects* 171).

But editor Jann Wenner and the writers who survived the magazine's early wrestling match with commerce held on tenaciously to other tenets of the ideology of rock as it had been formed in the 1960s. The music that was

praised had to radiate a serious artistic intent as well as foster the illusion that it had somehow managed to escape the taint of commerce. More importantly, it also had to evoke the bygone community of 1960s youth. Frith correctly identifies this impulse as conservative: "it looks to music to recreate the past" (*Sound Effects* 176). Thus, in its editorials and albums reviews, *Rolling Stone* collapsed the 1960s into the present.

As that present became the 1980s, it had a more elusive but no less potent threat to its present-ness - punk. Punk lent crucial forward momentum to a particular version of popular music history. Built on a series of revolutionary ruptures neatly confined to their own decades, this history moves from the 1950s and the 1960s into the 1970s with a litany of Elvis-Beatles-Sex Pistols at the center of its cycles. There is no poverty of literature on this trajectory. On the very first page of *Music For Pleasure*, Simon Frith traces the rock era as "born around 1956 with Elvis Presley, peaking around 1967 with (The Beatles 1967 album) *Sgt. Pepper*, dying around 1976 with the Sex Pistols" (*Music For Pleasure* 1). In his mammoth tome on British indie label Creation Records, David Cavanagh shows how the weight of this history bore down upon even an obscure but important fanzine like Tony Fletcher's *Jamming!* which "listed pop's four most momentous years as 1956 (rock 'n' roll), 1964 (Beatlemania), 1968 (rock is born) and 1976 (the evolution of punk in England)" (71). In *The End-Of-The-Century Party*, also on its first page, Steve Redhead calls these decades "the 'Golden Age' of youth culture and youth subcultures" and surmises that late 1980s Acid House "was not a new subculture in this sense, nor was it the long-desired 'new punk'" (1).

What linked 1970s punk back to previous ruptures, even its apparent opposite number in 1960s rock, was that it forged a sense of collective activity upon which a cohesive musical discourse could be formed. Critics made a

connection between the two eras through Situationism, whose constituents practiced everyday life as an art project. As Jon Savage notes, "Situationist theories, key elements in the 1968 French Riots, provided the final Sixties element in the trilogy (along with Pop Art and Camp) that made Punk Rock interventional" (123). But in fact, a Boomer like Robert Christgau found that punk reflected collective activity even better than any 1960s movement or phenomenon, including rock during its formative years:

> For all its antihippie rhetoric, punk meant to make something of a not dissimilar cultural upheaval, only without the '60s' icky, and fatal, softheadedness. From this vantage I can see my confidence (in the 1970s and punk) was bolstered by a consensus more sustaining than what I got out of Monterey or Woodstock or Chicago '68 or the Mobilization or any number of excellent Grateful Dead concerts....Predicated here on a shitload of discrete sound-objects whose aesthetic was so legible you could build a canon around it, there on a burgeoningly inchoate scene that didn't shrivel up and die when the Sex Pistols quit on us. (*Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s* 9)

In this regard, it should come as no surprise that as punk split off into myriad subcultures in the 1980s and beyond (hardcore, Oi!, peace punk, positive punk, post-punk, crust, straight edge, even perhaps imaginary microcultures such as weight lifter-core, etc.), many of them took on characteristics quite similar to 1960s countercultures. Punks dropped-out of society in much the same fashion as the hippies before them, spare-changing and squatting their way outside of commerce. And the music adopted rock's imperative of serious artistic intent with a particularly heavy emphasis on politically programmatic lyrics. Ann Powers made these connections in a piece on 1990s punk phenoms Rancid,

"Johnny Rotten would have spat on Gilman Street punks as modern-day hippies" (86).

As Redhead's comment on Acid House above suggests, there was no musical rupture in the 1980s to continue the Elvis-Beatles-Sex Pistols litany. Indeed, the 1980s are often characterized as a decade of waiting for a "new punk" messiah, an act to keep the rupture cycles of popular music history in motion. The most frequently reported sighting after punk is Nirvana, resulting in a history that extends forward from punk to the release of Nirvana's major label debut, *Nevermind*, in 1991 and passes over the 1980s altogether. Other reports are content to stop history dead at punk in the late 1970s. Wherever the specific historical coordinates fall, they are usually placed in direct relation to what Frith calls the mystical approach to music criticism, in which *Rolling Stone* writers were the unparalleled leaders:

> The rock experience – "the magic that can set you free" – is never described but endlessly referred back to as some mythical adolescent moment against which all subsequent rock moments can be judged. Punk, for example, was eventually welcomed by *Rolling Stone* not for what it said, not for its political or social stance, but because it offered the authentic rock 'n' roll buzz – the Clash were just like the Stones! (*Sound Effects* 176)

The quote about the magic of rock comes from *Rolling Stone*'s statement of purpose outlined in its first issue: "We hope we have something here for the artists and the industry, and every person who 'believes in the magic that can set you free'" (*Sound Effects* 169). This itself was a quote from the song "Do You Believe in Magic?" by archetypal hippy dippy band The Lovin' Spoonful. When writers claim, explicitly or otherwise, that the 1980s lacked the historical

significance of previous decades, they often chalk it up to the disappearance of precisely this magic.

So as early as 1981, Savage fortifies himself against his dire predictions of no punk-like movements in the 1980s with a reminder that "it only takes a moment for the magic to flow" (123). More precisely, in 1984, Lawrence Grossberg evokes the same Lovin' Spoonful lyric in awe of punk's destructive capabilities: "There is a sense in which, after punk, one can longer reasonably believe in the 'magic that can set you free'" ("Another Boring Day in Paradise" 51). And in a book collecting his 1980s Consumer Guides for the *Village Voice*, Christgau uses the word "magic" in a more positive formulation about 1980s music:

> There was popular music in the '50s and '60s and now the '70s (as well
> as the '20s and '30s and '40s) that retains an irreducible and
> unduplicatable magic. But anybody who thinks that kind of magic
> disappeared in the '80s understands neither history nor Parliament-
> Funkadelic. (The Sex Pistols, maybe. Not the Ramones.) (*Christgau's
> Record Guide: The '80s* 19)

But two years later (appropriately enough, in an article lightly praising another Lovin' Spoonful song, "Younger Generation"), he dangles 1960s countercultural values over post-punk youth cultures as a missed opportunity: "Progress along a line to infinity, the permanent cultural revolution: spontaneous, natural, automatic. How sad that it didn't turn out that way – sadder for you than for me, whether you know it or not" (Christgau and Dibbell 107). Given how he ends the piece on a sort of "prove me wrong" note, Christgau's rhetoric here is clearly meant as a sympathetic challenge for this younger generation to seize the reality of fragmentation as their cohesive legacy. But it comes off rather disingenuous, a preemptive strike against any claim to have already found such

hope, if not the aforementioned magic, in the music of the 1980s and 1990s. Despite his acute plea to historical understanding above, Christgau freezes history in an endless replay of highs in the sixties, to paraphrase the subtitle of a seminal but proudly backward-looking garage rock series.

Inheriting both of these dubious legacies (the failure of permanent cultural revolution and punk's intense, paralyzing cynicism), youth cultures in the 1980s found it increasingly difficult to live in the present. In fact, at times the very category of youth ceased to apply to them at all. Via aerobics (perhaps with former radical Jane Fonda) and self-absorbed, *Big Chill*-style hand-wringing, youth was extended to aging Boomers. But conveniently, they were well fortified against the setbacks of youth, at least in the way Frith defines them:

> All young people have...a marginal social status...They are not fully integrated into the economic structure...Whatever the other differences between them, young people share an experience of powerlessness...They seek a sense of autonomy and status and self-esteem to balance against their time of insignificance. (*Sound Effects* 195)

Boomers bloomed into honorary young people, albeit fully integrated into the economic structure and with considerably less feelings of powerlessness than actual youth. Meanwhile, the insignificance of actual youth intensified as it grew nearly impossible to seek a sense of autonomy and status and self-esteem under the draconian supply-side economics of Reagan and Thatcher. This is the generation that was eventually lumped together under the aegis of Generation X, characterized as either inherently lazy or wisely unwilling to work hard in the face of seemingly permanent economic recession.

Popular music traditionally assisted youth in balancing against this formerly temporary time of insignificance. But with its history effectively stalled after the Elvis-Beatles-Sex Pistols matrix, the music appeared to have already gone through its birth-maturity-death cycle. What hope could it offer young people looking to put their own life cycle in motion? Furthermore, with the present so seemingly unwriteable, what historical assessment could critics hope to produce? This dead-end situation thus prompted Grossberg to ask "Is There Rock After Punk?" and Patrice Petro to situate Madonna's bricolage behavior "After Shock, Between Boredom and History." In order to assert any kind of unique identity for 1980s popular music, it became necessary to flat-out deny history. In arguably the best book about 1980s popular music written in the same era, David Rimmer willingly embraces this ploy as can be gleaned from its title: *Like Punk Never Happened.*

And yet every month in the late 1980s, in this era when history had reportedly come to an end, when nothing new had happened, one American magazine attempted to seize the present as an object of historical inquiry. Beginning publication in 1985 by Bob Guccione Jr., *SPIN* magazine came into existence partially as a challenge to *Rolling Stone*'s hegemony, as the subscription advertisement from the first issue made perfectly clear: "On March 19th, *SPIN* magazine hit the newsstand to give *Rolling Stone* the competition everyone but *Rolling Stone* hoped it would get" (No author 7). With a phalanx of young critics as its weapon, *SPIN* constituted its readership as a generation desperately trying to wrest a definition of themselves away from Boomer preoccupations.

Jim Finnegan, in the only academic account of *SPIN* I could find, identifies this generation as Generation X and equates it with a punk sensibility, a sensibility hopelessly at odds with the "always-already-thoroughly-appropriated"

mediascape of the late 1980s/early 1990s. Centering his essay on a analysis of the cultural activism of Riot Grrrl and ACT UP's Gran Fury, as reported by *SPIN*, Finnegan meticulously details the vexed attempts to guard "Gen X-identified symbols of disaffection and dissent" from absorption into mainstream mass media. But he tries to get beyond questions of whether or not a mass media publication like *SPIN* automatically compromises the revolutionary potential in these symbols. Instead, his

> theoretical goal is to make a first pass at 'reading' *Spin* magazine in a
> Cultural Studies context, and in the process map the boundaries of
> Andreas Huyssen's construction of the 'post-avant-garde' as the hope of
> a political postmodernism. (Finnegan no page)

> I would not want to deny the import of mapping these boundaries nor

that *SPIN* offers a useful launching pad for such concerns. Quite to the contrary, I also posit *SPIN* as the hope of a political postmodernism. But I want to nuance this view of *SPIN* to show that its pages included more than a desperate concern with mapping the boundaries of the post-avant-garde. Some writers at *SPIN* magazine, especially John Leland in his "Singles" column, posited the hope of a political postmodernism directly within the mainstream mass media. Where Riot Grrrl and most of its celebrants made "an intellectual and political investment in a 'popular' scene that refuses to engage the popular almost as a matter of policy," Leland, for one, discovered liberating, even revolutionary potential in such unlikely, inarguably popular artists as Milli Vanilli, Paula Abdul and Debbie Gibson. In the very ahistoricity of these acts, Leland maintained not only that something had happened in the Eighties but that something new had happened. But always these proclamations were a transformed expression of a social struggle.

So I want to make several points in my analysis of *SPIN* magazine in the late 1980s. First and foremost, I want to reconstruct the writing in *SPIN* as a struggle to get beyond the Boomer/*Rolling Stone* stranglehold on discursive hegemony. To this end, I will outline how *SPIN* magazine worked out its historical mission in relation to popular music against a vexed concept of history that characterizes post-1960s Western culture in general. Second, unsurprisingly, I want to disarticulate Finnegan's link between Generation X and punk. However, my concerns lie less with providing a more complex definition of Generation X than with demonstrating how the appropriation of a pop aesthetic became a identity marker for certain popular music critics and fans. Finally, I want to question the supposed ineffectiveness of pop music for a political postmodernism. Where Finnegan asks "What, if any, kinds of oppositional cultural work (including but not limited to queer cultural critique) may survive the commodification process?," I wonder if oppositional cultural work needs to survive commodification. If "'the fate of most critical art' in the twentieth century...is to be 'co-opted and neutralized' by the overriding commodity constraints of the art world," I ask if co-optation necessarily results in neutralization.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Before delving into the specifics of John Leland and his "Singles" column, however, I embrace, with perhaps foolhardy enthusiasm, the term "postmodern" to designate the historical context of *SPIN* in the 1980s. I insist upon this designation precisely because of the active forces outlined above that made living in the present so difficult in the 1980s. "Postmodern" could have served as a much-needed rallying point, a definitional shorthand for an era in dire need of one. But for every attempt to explain the uniqueness of this situation as postmodern (mine is certainly not the first), writers like Frith, Redhead and

Grossberg countered with an account of how the 1980s had no special claim on the postmodern. Frith, for instance, places the birth of postmodernism around 1945, maintaining that the "historical moment of postmodernism is also the moment of the birth of rock culture" (Frith and Horne 9). Taken with his confidence that the rock era was over by the 1980s, it would logically follow that the postmodern era was over by this time as well, a patently absurd suggestion. Similarly, Grossberg locates a postmodern "structure of feeling…in the immediate postwar years" ("Is Anybody Listening?" 49). And Redhead finds that "attempts to connect postmodernism as the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism" come too late and "miss this specific periodisation of the postmodern" (20).

I find that these appeals to a broader historical contextualization of the postmodern drain the term of its usefulness mainly because they ignore 1. the specific qualities of modernism to which the postmodern poses a challenge and 2. the postmodern problem of history as either constant flux or permanent stasis which, in relation to popular music, only became a problem in the 1980s. So when in 1984, Grossberg tries to theorize a rock and roll apparatus in general, he fails to understand to what extent he collapses the post-punk era in which he is writing into his transhistorical theory of a general rock and roll apparatus:

> This (absence of structure) reflexively positions the rock and roll
> apparatus within its postmodern context and constitutes rock and roll's
> ambiguity towards its own importance and power. Unlike other forms of
> popular culture, the "postmodern politics" of rock and roll undermines its
> claim to produce a stable affective formation. Rather it participates in the
> production of temporary "affective alliances" that celebrate their own
> instability and superficiality. While such alliances may apparently make

> claims to totality within their own moment of empowerment, they are
> decisively marked by their fluidity and self-deprecation ("Nothing matters,
> and what if it did?" [John Cougar]), and by the ease with which the rock
> and roll apparatus slides from one alliance into another. In other words,
> the rock and roll apparatus incorporates and even celebrates the
> "disposability" of any effective alliance without thereby sacrificing its own
> claim to existence. ("Another Boring Day in Paradise" 44)

I think this disposability is grossly overstated here. First of all, I find it extremely
difficult to believe that a sentence like the one that opens this passage could
have been written any time before the advent of punk. One of the key aspects
that defines the 1960s counterculture is that they believed unambiguously in
the importance and power of rock. If indeed "the 'postmodern politics' of rock
and roll undermines its claim to produce a stable affective formation," then
these politics do not apply to the 1960s counterculture which rarely, if ever,
celebrated their own instability and superficiality. The fourth sentence in the
passage above is Grossberg's escape clause in that the alliances of both the
1960s counterculture and punk certainly made claims to totality within their
own moment of empowerment, thus strengthening his model of a rock and roll
apparatus as transhistorical. But both alliances are much more decisively
marked by these claims rather than their fluidity and self-deprecation (and not
only because the John Cougar album title he quotes comes from 1980, well
before the artist reattached the Mellencamp surname to signify authenticity). In
short, the postmodern politics of rock and roll could only be mobilized from the
ashes of the first punk explosion of the late 1970s.

This is why the more convincing case for the postmodern character of
punk misses both its modernist qualities and its undeniable status as a rupture
in the history of popular music. I will discuss the characteristics of modernism

more fully in the next chapter. For now, I want to end this chapter on two pointed comments that not only epitomize punk's legacy as a historical rupture but also beautifully describe the post-punk postmodern problem of a history of no ruptures. The first quote comes from a blurb by Rob Tannenbaum in the 1990 Pazz & Jop Critics Poll from the *Village Voice*. Tannenbaum writes in response to the "scandal" of Milli Vanilli, a late 1980s dance pop duo who falsely presented themselves as the real singers of their hits and who play a central role in this thesis: "In the midst of daily lip-synch revelations, I half expected to learn that the Braidy Bunch was actually a cunning Situationist prank to discredit postmodern theory through reductio ad absurdum" (14). To fully grasp the significance of this quote, one has to understand that punk is frequently described as a Situationist experiment on popular music while Milli Vanilli are frequently upheld as paragons of postmodern virtue. But the image of punk here is of a thunder-stealing force that still casts its revolutionary shadow into the 1990s. Thus Tannenbaum's quote reflects the difficulty of setting off Milli Vanilli, the postmodern or the 1980s in general as historically unique.

The other quote comes, appropriately enough, from a 1989 brief by Frank Owen in *SPIN* about the use of the word "postmodern" as a new music marketing category:

> That the avant-garde fringes, whether in art or pop, are a radical refusal of mainstream consumer values is a difficult belief to sustain in 1989...Eclecticism is the result of this loss of faith in the traditional role of the avant-garde - a situation in which no one can agree on any one initiative like punk. (20)

Again, we have an account of punk here which emphasizes the consensus surrounding it. Furthermore, Owen's comments attempt to describe the present of the 1980s as a "coming after" – post-avant-garde, post-punk, postmodern.

Even though few if any of the writers for *SPIN* identified themselves or their writing as postmodernist, most of the writing in *SPIN* shared one initiative – the desire to get beyond the vagaries of modernism as manifested in the discursive hegemony of rock and *Rolling Stone*. I will focus on how Leland discovered that initiative in mainstream consumer values rather than any avant-garde.

So, in the next chapter, I will discuss the features of postmodernism as a prelude to a discussion of how Leland plotted out his historical initiative. To this end, I will use Fredric Jameson and his Callipygian opus *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as my tour guide. For a work of such dumbfounding scope that finds room for chapters on art, video, literature, architecture, theory, film, and economics, it is somewhat surprising to discover no chapter on music, although Jameson's few comments on music are perceptive indeed. This chapter, then, can be taken as a tardy addendum.

The second half of the next chapter will analyze the modernism vs. postmodernism debate as a species of the vexed concept of history in the 1980s, given how much both sides are preoccupied with legitimating claims of historical change. In particular, I will discuss how that debate gets played out in accounts of popular music. What these accounts tend to ignore is the social function of postmodernism, something made quite clear in the pages of *SPIN* in the late 1980s.

CHAPTER 2: THE POSTMODERN CHARACTER OF *SPIN*

In the very first sentence of his book, Jameson insists that questions of history are central to any consideration of postmodernism: "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). That age, of course, is the post-1960s era of disillusionment in Western countries. And certainly by the 1980s, the ideals of 1960s countercultures took on the characteristics of a stifling modernism. The reaction against this stifling modernism, then, is postmodernism, a not so obvious state of affairs as will be demonstrated later.

Jameson goes to great lengths to distinguish between modernism and postmodernism. One way he makes a distinction is by uncovering the social position of modernism whereby it offended Victorian sensibility, maintained a critical distance from commodity capitalism, and frowned upon the institutionalization of art. By the 1950s, however, modernism itself had become institutionalized. Picasso and Joyce were now in the canon and abstract expressionism became the art of choice on the walls of late capitalist bureaucracies. Thus, Jameson situates postmodernism as a 1960s revolt against 1950s modernism and its institutionalization. The problem here is that 1960s revolt had itself become institutionalized by the 1980s, again most visibly and oppressively in *Rolling Stone* in relation to popular music.

For the most part, however, Jameson recognizes postmodernism as "the substitute for the sixties and the compensation for their political failure" (xvi). Indeed, he even has a word about what would constitute modernism in popular music: "The Beatles and the Stones now (stand) as the high-modernist moment of that more recent and rapidly evolving tradition" (Jameson 1). This is the

moment when rock-n-roll matured into rock, its modernist manifestation. The modernist characteristics of rock fostered a variety of myths that helped define 1960s countercultures. In order to pin down these characteristics, it is important to keep in mind that modernism sought to distance itself from the commodification it associated with mass culture. Modernist painters and writers, for instance, longed to cast out all the attendant fears that association carried, particularly an engulfing femininity. Rock replicated this dynamic within mass culture itself. Keir Keightley has reconsidered rock along these lines – as an ideology that suffers anxiety over its own mass cultural form. The modernist strains of rock discourse served to stratify popular music from within with claims to purity and authenticity that its opposite number pop supposedly lacked.

Another modernist myth of rock is that it possesses a transasethetic quality which it shares with the great monuments to modernity in architecture (Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies Van der Rohe). With little reflection on its own construction as an aesthetic object, rock could claim loftier ideals such as the ability to signal social and political upheaval. Gen Xer Julian Dibbell mocks these pretensions in an article about classic rock's cultural persistence into the 1990s. One of the strategies against this dominance, Dibbell claims, is his generation's knack for ripping classic rock form its context, draining it of its social and political values, and treating the floating signifier that results as "mere" music, if not hard information (Christgau and Dibbell 106). Furthermore, classic rock winds up as little more than one stop along a fragmented musical landscape. The eclecticism of this landscape is thus embraced as a weapon against the totalizing myopia of the counterculture.

The moment of the Beatles and the Stones, then, gave birth to what has come to be known as rockism – the upholding of rock's modernist virtues as

they became institutionalized and, as with most institutions, averse to change. Meanwhile, the challenge to rockism (for instance, from *SPIN*) is best understood as postmodernism, for lack of a term like popism. This stratification within popular music set the terms for debate as a series of rock vs. pop dichotomies: albums vs. singles (it comes as no surprise that John Leland made his name as a singles columnist); author vs. consumer; hermeneutic vs. utilitarian; etc. Leland and other *SPIN* writers thus tried to live in the present ("to live with the past (rather) than...in it," as Dibbell would have it) largely by upholding the second terms of these dichotomies in a necessary and systematic articulation of pop (Christgau and Dibbell 106). Instead of harboring nostalgia for the present, they dove into the implications of the author/consumer dichotomy, for instance, to rigidly and unambiguously outline the epistemological breaks with the musical past.

As with most modernist products, rock privileges the author over the consumer. Rock artists are often hailed as geniuses who flex their transaesthetic beefcake and mask the production of their own creations. In an attempt to theorize this modernist genius, Jameson chooses James Joyce as his prime example. His portrait resembles a painting with two panels. On one side, Joyce is producing masterpieces in his Paris room. On the other, the schlep on the street grows alienated from the apparently mystical process of creation in the face of such towering mastery (Jameson 307). But Jameson could have just as easily been talking about any 1960s rock avatar lording over their mythic creations. In fact, this is exactly what Christgau does as he distinguishes these creations from the music of the 1970s:

> Insofar as the music (of the 1970s) retained any mythic power, the myth
> was self-referential -- there were lots of songs about the rock and roll life
> but very few about how rock could change the world, except as a new

brand of painkiller....And by most people's standards, a rough matchup of '60s and '70s artists--Smokey Robinson vs. Gamble & Huff, Bob Dylan vs. Neil Young, the Beatles vs. Rod Stewart or Stevie Wonder or Elton John or Linda Ronstadt or Fleetwood Mac (or some combination of the five), the Stones vs. Led Zeppelin, Aretha Franklin or Sam Cooke or Otis Redding vs. Al Green, James Brown vs. James Brown, Jimi Hendrix vs. God, Sly Stone vs. George Clinton, Lou Reed vs. Johnny Rotten--pits genius against talent again and again (*Rock Albums*, 10-11).

SPIN writers, then, would obsessively pull back the curtain from the creation process of all these 1960s geniuses in a ceaseless movement of unromantic deconstruction. Leland, for one, puts not only Jackie Wilson and The Who under his scalpel but such 1970s phenomena as Bruce Springsteen and punk as well. In the process, he devised new critical paradigms to understand music that barely required talent, never mind genius. For example, in a column tackling what he calls "the new disco" of the 1980s (Madonna, Lisa Lisa, Nancy Martinez, the Cover Girls, Janet Jackson, Exposé, Kim Wilde, Debbie Gibson, Nocera, Double Destiny, Stacey Q, Company B, Belinda Carlisle), he shows how their thin, flat voices are radically incommensurate with the bigger than life emotions they are trying to express. They break the author/consumer contracts of trust or even mere information transmission that were upheld by the rafters-reaching disco divas of old (Loleatta Holloway, Chaka Khan, Patti Jo). Authority is thus drained from the author and the empty space at the center of a song like Jody Watley's "Don't You Want Me" puts the terms of those author/consumer contracts into relief (Leland, "Singles" 32).

And along with authority, the world-changing myths of the 1960s rock genius get drained from this music as well. Or, more precisely, the focus shifts from what the author can convey to how the consumer uses the music. With a

blank message and a dead or, at best, unconvincing author mobilizing the text, the music can travel more freely in a variety of contexts. Dance music and dancing, along with such new technology as the sampler and the Walkman, thus took center stage in Leland's "Singles" column. And although it seems obvious, much of this activity bearing down on the pop side of the rock/pop equation was done in a populist spirit. Even when he placed pop fodder like Debbie Gibson, New Kids on the Block or the new disco to the side, he praised less popular music like house for its architectural qualities, its ability to create contexts, rather than its subcultural purity.

Much of this music had links to postmodern architecture, the populism of which

> emit(s) signs and messages to a spatial 'reading public,' unlike the monumentality of the high modern. Meanwhile, the newer architecture is itself thereby validated, insofar as it is accessible to semiotic analysis and thus proves to be an essentially aesthetic object (rather than the transaesthetic constructions of the high modern). Here then, aesthetics reinforces an ideology of communication." (Jameson, 420)

Leland never quite submitted Milli Vanilli and Paula Abdul to semiotics in his writing for *SPIN*, at least not in any self-conscious fashion. Nevertheless, in a column called "Temporary Music" that I will analyze in depth later on, he validated the music of both acts for the ways in which it emits mutable digital information (Leland, "Singles: Temporary Music" 87). This information comprises signs and messages that get added to an infinite arsenal of historical surfaces available at anyone's disposal. Or as Christgau would put it, writing about hip-hop (which Leland also covered a great deal) in his book of 1980s Consumer Guides: "The information will be direct and accessible like Steely Dan's chords never were" (*Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s* 17).

***

By now, it should be clear that *SPIN*'s challenge to rockism was a postmodern one, sharing at least three characteristics enumerated by Jameson as endemic to postmodernism in general: historicity, antifoundationalism, and populism. Historicity refers to the attempt to think the present historically in order to grasp it as a thing. The thing-ness of the present offers a clearer vantage point on reification, as Jameson so succinctly defines it: "The way in which a product somehow shuts us out even from a sympathetic participation, by imagination, in its production. It comes before us, no questions asked, as something we could not begin to imagine doing for ourselves" (317). The energies redirected in observing reification lead from an antifoundationalism positioned in the case of *SPIN* against the dominance of rockism in popular music discourse. Finally, *SPIN*'s spirit of deconstruction was put in the service of a populism meant to bridge those alienating gaps between the Joyces and the schleps, between the Beatles and the masses, if not the Stevie Wonders.

Once the rhetoric in *SPIN* can be identified as a postmodern challenge to *Rolling Stone*'s modernism, however, the problem then becomes how to determine the originality of this stance. And the obstacles pop up at a most fundamental level. Postmodernism's difficulty with signaling change start at the differentiation within the word itself. From a design perspective, those complementary orbs in "post" and "modern" make for a lovely logo. But the incorporation of modernism within the word is more like a failed advertising campaign. As Jameson puts it:

> (It is) parasitory on another system (most often on modernism itself), whose residual traces and unconsciously produced values then become a precious index to the failure of a whole new culture to come to birth. (Jameson xii)

But the difficulties run deeper than the word itself. All postmodern culture is infected with this impurity, at times even flashing it as a paradoxical badge of historical identity. Postmodern architecture, for one, places a panoply of floating signifiers next to another with little interest in fusing them all together into one totality. Jameson's term for this aspect is "wrapping":

> One text is simply being wrapped in another, with the paradoxical effect that the first - a mere writing sample, a paragraph or illustrative sentence, a segment or moment torn out of its context - becomes affirmed as autonomous and as a kind of unity in its own right. (Jameson 103)

Seizing on the word "sample" from the quote above, one could easily use "wrapping" to describe the production strategies of rap along with myriad 1980s dance music genres which frequently built their tracks via digital sampling. But as with the word "postmodernism" itself, one could just as easily use "wrapping" to disdain postmodern culture for its the constitutive unoriginality. The 1980s even gave birth to a disease that displayed the feature of "wrapping" – AIDS. No one ever died of AIDS per se but rather AIDS-related causes given how infection could result in a variety of diseases. Thus a term like "the AIDS virus" makes no sense in that it conflates disease with infection.[3]

So if postmodernism is the attempt to live in the present and to remember how to think historically, it has a great deal of counterintuitive tools at its disposal. Its every characteristic – its impurities, its antifoundationalism, even its populism - seems to short circuit the project of historicity before it even begins. How could one attempt to live in the present via an articulation of pop, for instance? The ephemerality of so much pop music would appear to resist historicization. And Leland's focus on dance music only intensifies

---

[3] See Jan Zita Grover. "AIDS: Keywords." in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1988), 17-30.

matters. Questions of authorship in dance music have always been vexed. But with few clear or recognizable authors on hand, what history can be told? Even the 12" single, which keeps dance music in the mix at clubs, poses problems for history. As Will Straw has shown, the 12" single is both a lousy promotional device and an "(in)significant mark(er) of historical change" ("Value and Velocity" 174).

But given the extent to which history had became such a burden in the 1980s, Leland, for one, would gladly seize on a music that resists history. So he tried to live in the present by valorizing music that lived in the present...and nowhere else. Time and again, Leland will champion the ahistorical – the way Sequal's "Tell The Truth" comes from nowhere and goes right back there ("Singles" 92), how Debbie Gibson and bubblegum represents not youth but rather its freezing into an eternal present ("Baby It's You" 23-5), the music of Milli Vanilli predicting its own demise as a "here today-gone tomorrow" pop trinket ("Temporary Music" 87). And through the more sedimented practice of criticism, Leland and other *SPIN* writers surmised that the ahistorical could be translated into history and the new history that resulted could be used as a marker of generational identity. Their project was similar to the one Jameson outlines on the very last page of his book:

> The attempt to see whether by systematizing something that is
> resolutely unsystematic, and historicizing something that is resolutely
> ahistorical, one couldn't outflank it and force a historical way at least of
> thinking about that. "We have to name the system": this high point of the
> sixties finds an unexpected revival in the postmodernism debate. (418)

<div align="center">***</div>

Despite (and often, because of) these attempts to historicize the ahistorical, a variety of discourses used the counterintuitive tools of

postmodernism against itself to keep history effectively stalled. Underneath these attempts lied the following question: What would have to be achieved in order for an era to be differentiated as postmodern? In short, what constitutes change? And here we butt up against the definition of postmodernism as an antifoundationalism so total that it threatens to plunge all discourse and identity into a vortex of relativity. Going back to Dibbell, he clearly palms off a communicational populism to view this situation as constitutive of Generation X subjectivity, "defining 'my generation' (as) a kind of pragmatic eclecticism with little use for grand, unifying obsessions" (although to complicate matters, he calls "this approach...modern and revolutionary") (Christgau and Dibbell, 106). Similarly, Leland, no stranger to revolutionary rhetoric himself, shared the belief with other *SPIN* editors that there should be no canons whatsoever. Instead of despairing in the shadow of some bygone golden age, *SPIN* celebrated the avenues of communication opened up by canon destruction which allowed heretofore concealed bits of information to be transmitted. Jameson calls this celebration the relief of the postmodern and it stems less from sweeping away golden ages than leveling the playing field so that all cultural objects have an equal shot at communication.

Take, for instance, the obscure garage house 12" single "Without You" by Touch released on the Supertronics label in 1987. Few, if any, at *Rolling Stone* probably knew the thing even existed. With its anonymously soulful vocals and electronic rhythm bed, it certainly was not recuperable by rockist ideology. In a interview with Leland, I reminded him that his Singles column successor Frank Owen placed "Without You" at number one on his list of the ten best singles of the 1980s ("Singles" 81). He paused briefly then gave off a relieved chuckle: "I love that Frank would put something like that at number one" (Author Interview).

But the relief of the postmodern was supposed to result in the widespread availability of form production, the ability to unromantically imagine the creation of even the greatest works of art. A more pessimistic account would instead posit that the only thing made available is more things to buy, "information to be transmitted" in the paragraph above merely a more polite term for something like "items to be sold." No matter how many canons are gone with the wind, what remains intact is late capitalism's system of inequities. In fact, canon destruction feeds into this system, throwing more and more people onto late capitalism's treadmill of the new in the quest for unbridled accumulation. Thus, Craig Calhoun takes issue with narrow postmodernist accounts for "not addressing the empirical question of whether social relations, most basically relations of power, are in fact changing" (83). And Jameson himself eventually takes the position that postmodernism is little more than a uniquely successful convolution of capitalism if not its very logic: "Despite the delirium of some of its celebrants and apologists..., a truly new culture could only emerge through the collective struggle to create a new social system" (Jameson xii).

The immediate historical precedent for statements like these is unquestionably the countercultural activity of the 1960s, despite the fact that its participants failed themselves to usher in a truly new social system by the time their "golden era" had passed. It gave rise to a climate in the 1980s where nothing, particularly "various changes in media and style," could be described as postmodern or even just plain new until it had aided in overthrowing modernism and/or capitalism for good (Calhoun 83). Christgau provides a perfect summation of this cultural prerequisite in a review of Billy Joel's 1982 album *The Nylon Curtain*: "The basic belief of Cold War babies is that anything less than everything is a cheat, and their piano man agrees" (*Christgau's Record*

Guide: The '80s 215). But another Christgau review (of the Neville Brothers' nostalgia-ridden *Fiyo on the Bayou,* an album released around the same time as *The Nylon Curtain*) may be even more instructive here, describing the album as "a lazy way for oldtimers to convince themselves that the world isn't changing" (*Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s* 291).

This attitude found subtle ways of infiltrating discourse, even outside of music criticism. In "The Search for Tradition: Avantgarde and Postmodernism in the 1970s," Andreas Huyssen teeters between a deep appreciation of postmodernism's challenge to modernism and a bored, "been there, done that" assessments of its newness. On the one hand, he provides a useful list of the crucial characteristics of postmodernism which help explain why it would prove undesirable to complete, against Jurgen Habermas' wishes, the project of modernity:

> The critical deconstruction of enlightened rationalism and logocentrism by theoreticians of culture, the decentering of traditional notions of identity, the fight of women and gays for a legitimate social and sexual identity outside of the parameters of male, heterosexual vision, the search for alternatives in our relationship with nature, including the nature of our own bodies. (Huyssen 175)

On the other, he aims to shake American postmodernism's "confidence of being at the edge of history" via a dialectical view of modernism, whereby the historical European avant-garde of Dada and Surrealism posits a marked contrast to the high modernist tradition of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. American postmodernism's revolt against bourgeois institution art, according to Huyssen, is little more than a replay of the traditional avant-garde's cultural politics; the ossification of modern art into "high art" simply occurred later in America than it did in Europe. Thus Huyssen can proclaim that

Pop, happenings, Concept, experimental music, surfiction, and performance art of the 1960s and 1970s look(ed) more novel than they really were...where Europeans might react with a sense of déjà-vu, Americans could legitimately sustain a sense of novelty, excitement, and breakthrough. (167)

Clearly, what is at stake in distinguishing postmodernism from modernism is legitimization. Notice how the word pops up in both of Huyssen's quotes above - women and gays fought for a *legitimate* social and sexual identity outside of the parameters of male, heterosexual vision in the 1970s; Americans could *legitimately* sustain a sense of novelty, excitement, and breakthrough about Pop, happenings, Concept, experimental music, surfiction, and performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, which, of course, they could not actually do since those art forms "look(ed) more novel than they really were." The two statements start to intertwine with one another in a rather sour fashion when one recalls that women and gays were some of the chief producers and consumers of those art forms, especially Pop Art.[4] So while women and gays fought for that social and sexual identity, and fought for it with a sense of novelty, excitement, and breakthrough, it may not have resulted in one that Huyssen would want to legitimate.

And yet these sensations are no less felt for their putative illegitimacy. What goes repeatedly unexamined in the myriad attempts to deflate the radical rhetoric of postmodernism is not only its sensual and psychological impact but also the particular constituents it hails. Whether a bona fide epistemological rupture or nothing new under the sun, postmodernism remains a discursive field which fosters subject positions and, as such, raises a pressing question that

---

[4] For an excellent anthology that rolls around in the queerness of Pop Art, see Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz, eds. *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

Huyssen and so many others mired in semantic quicksand seem uninterested in addressing: Who can legitimately claim a historical moment or an identity, decentered or otherwise, as their own? In short, if "the psychic habitus of the new age (of postmodernism) demands the absolute break, strengthened by a generational rupture, achieved more properly in the 1960s," as Jameson surmises, it also demands the constant legitimization of breaks, a spectrum with euphoric celebration and jaded unwavering at the extremes (xx).

So in addition to the 1960s counterculture and punk as historical burdens, this perpetual process of legitimization seemed to preempt attempts to delineate the new developments in 1980s popular music as postmodern, explicitly or otherwise. In the next chapter, then, I will show how popular music discourse became infected with the anxiety over postmodernism as an effective barometer of change. I will also show how this anxiety masks the social function of postmodern rhetoric. In the case of *SPIN*, there were explicit attempts to deflate this rhetoric that render it an ideal case study in 1980s popular music historiography.

CHAPTER 3: *SPIN*'S INVESTMENT IN POSTMODERNITY

The burning desire to delegitimize postmodernism as a break in popular music history is best exemplified by Andrew Goodwin's essay "Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction." With this title, Goodwin is obviously invoking the specter of Walter Benjamin's landmark essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as a sort of postmodernist manifesto *avant la lettre*, given how the extensive use of digital technology in both the production and consumption of popular music in the 1980s seems to bear out its cultural analysis. As Goodwin notes:

> In the age of mass production, Benjamin stated that the audience is no longer concerned with an original textual moment. In the age of digital reproduction the notion of the 'aura' is further demystified by the fact that *everyone* may purchase an "original..." This is something new: the mass production of aura. (259)

Goodwin centers his analysis around the sampler and the drum machine, two instruments central to 1980s dance music production. The sampler, in particular, is the quintessential postmodern instrument in that it can "digitally encode any sounds, store them, and enable the manipulation and reproduction of those sounds within almost infinite parameters and no discernible loss of sound quality" (Goodwin 261). As a result, notions of copy and original, musician and machine, synthetic coldness and authentic feel become confused if not indistinguishable. But Goodwin contends that neither instrument has realized its postmodern potential because "its use and meaning often remain wedded to earlier aesthetics" (261). He then proceeds to demonstrate how concepts of creativity and authenticity survive in postmodernity, albeit in different guises. In particular, he champions those producers who use the

sampler to remix popular hits since these remixes often radiate an authorial voice:

> Listen to Arthur Baker turn middle-of-the-road group Fleetwood Mac into modernist avant-gardists (on his remix of "Big Love") and what you hear is a steadfast refusal to settle for the pleasures of the pop formula offered in the original. But the point here is that this aesthetic isn't postmodern at all – it is modernist, with a dance beat. It is Theodor Adorno mistreating Fleetwood Mac, not Walter Benjamin celebrating them. (Goodwin 271)

He also seizes on the electronic handclap for more ammunition in debunking postmodernism's uniqueness. The Roland TR-808 drum machine, for instance, was one of the chief sources for electronically simulated handclaps in popular music of the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially on disco records. When Roland introduced newer models, however, musicians continued to use the TR-808 handclap since it had come to sound natural. Instead of reading this development of the post-industrial sensorium as a perfect postmodern example of our absorption into a realm of synthetic signs, Goodwin reminds us that musical representation does not necessarily occur through mimesis:

> (If we) consider (musical representation's) process of signification in relation to intrapersonal "states of mind," emotions, and so on, we might conclude that the electronic handclap *is* real. It *really* produces certain physiological effects when you dance to it. (266)

There are two problems with this conclusion. First, Goodwin provides us with no reason why these developments cannot necessarily be deemed postmodern. They may indeed be wedded to modernist impulses. But Arthur Baker claiming auteur status with his "Big Love" is still quite different from The Beatles claiming auteur status with *Sgt. Pepper* or The Sex Pistols with

"Anarchy in the UK." Similarly, hearing an electronic handclap as real is quite different from hearing the interplay of the musicians on Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks* or the temporal unity of George Jones' singing on "He Stopped Loving Her Today" as real. Are these developments *really* so similar as to be unworthy of different nomenclature?

Second, Goodwin is not really talking about dancing here; he is describing a listening process shared by various music creators. Missing from this analysis of 1980s dance music, then, is not just the dancefloor but dancers as well. In short, it is clear that Goodwin falls prey to the production bias of modernist aesthetics, a pattern of thought that privileges the author. His reading of Benjamin, for instance, is certainly slanted away from notions of consumption, which were central to Benjamin himself. In "The Work of Art" essay, Benjamin was celebrating the destruction of aura not in and of itself but, rather, insofar as it removed the reception of art from bourgeois, contemplative reception. It is important to remember that Benjamin focuses largely on film in his essay because film, as opposed to painting, for instance, allows "the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception" (235). One might just as easily make a similar claim for 1980s dance music as opposed to such interpretation-saturated works as The Beatles' "White" album or Bob Dylan's *John Wesley Harding*. In the age of mechanical as well as digital (re)production, then, it is a *mass* audience that is no longer concerned with an original textual moment. From this vantage point, the potential political ramifications of these newly formed congregations become clear. Siegfried Kracauer, a contemporary of Benjamin, put it best in his "Cult of Distraction" essay: "Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions" (326).

That any kind of mass audience remains a cipher in this field is evident from Goodwin's conclusion:

> By conflating post-modernism as *theory* and as *condition,* the former finds itself with a vested interest in promoting the latter, if not morally and/or politically, then as a cultural form of far greater significance than the evidence often suggests." (272)

But by conflating theor*ists* and their theories, Goodwin seems to find himself with a vested interest in erasing a mass of voices. While creativity and authenticity still exist, their no doubt eternal reconfigurations offer no explanation as to why anyone would celebrate their destruction. This is because Goodwin appears barely concerned with who these celebrants might be, who are the postmodern*ists*. In sum, the premature requiems for authenticity, aura and authorship as well as history have an extraordinarily legible social and economic history all their own.

To choose one example before analyzing *SPIN* in this context, dance music surely allowed a gay male mass to encounter itself, as Walter Hughes outlines in his superlative essay "In The Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco." Where Goodwin posits a connection between the body and nature on the dancefloor, Hughes maintains that disco music's connection to the dancing body is anything but natural. He discusses it as a disciplinary discourse which forgoes much of the pleasures of narrative:

> There is rarely an identifiable direction, progression or climax in disco music; the prolongation of its own continuity is its only end. The mixing of the music by the producer and the remixing of it by the club DJ shatter, rebuild and reshatter any architectonics a disco song might ever have possessed, making it difficult to identify its beginning or end. In the discotheque, the 'disco-text' strives to shake off all remnants of its own

> textuality, to become pure, unconstructed, undifferentiated discourse,
> this purity being (an) example of its unmediated power to stimulate
> dancing. (Hughes 149)

The pleasure for disco dancers inheres in how they willingly submit themselves to the DJ's maintenance of the beat to the break of dawn. And this submission opens them up to the creation of new identities, "precisely by enacting the destruction of the socialized self represented in conventional cultural products in language, narrative structure and authorial control" (Hughes 150).

Of course, this combination of submission and non-narrative forms of address harnesses the potential to produce repressive effects. In his "Freudian Theory and The Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," Theodor Adorno pinpoints the effectiveness of de facto non-narrative speech, rambling over into near glossolalia, for fascist leaders: "Language itself, devoid of its rational significance, functions in a magical way and furthers those archaic regressions which reduce individuals to members of crowds" (148). It would not be difficult to tease out parallels between disco's prolongation of its own continuity and the "compulsion to speak incessantly" in fascist propaganda (Adorno 148). Certainly, dance music's considerably long chain of second person commands ("Get Up and Boogie;" "Work It To The Bone"[5]) betrays a fascist taint.

But Hughes shows how such a regime can produce more liberatory results. In a phrase glazed with remarkable echoes of Kracauer, he argues that disco, and more specifically, *dancing* to disco

> was one element in the post-Stonewall project of reconstituting those
> persons medically designated 'homosexuals' as members of a 'gay'

---

[5] Silver Convention, "Get Up and Boogie (That's Right)," *The Disco Years, Vol. 6: Everybody Dance* (Rhino Records, 1995); LNR, "Work It to The Bone," *Best of House Music, Vol. 2: Gotta Have House* (Profile Records, 1993).

minority group, and of rendering them individually and collectively visible.[6]
(148)

Played with ear-punishing volume through enormous amplifiers at a club, disco has this ability to construct alternate subjectivities not only through the submission to non-narrative forms mentioned above but also because one can literally feel the beat within the body. In fact, many disco lyrics explicitly reiterate this notion. Hughes uses the example of Technotronic's 1989 hit "Get Up (Before The Night Is Over)": "One, two: I'm a part of you/Three, four: so get your butt on the floor." The frequently robotic beat penetrates the dancers in a human-machine synergy that relinquishes the mastery associated with male heterosexual subjectivity.[7]

Hughes astutely adds that the voice that rides this beat most often belongs to an African-American female singer or diva. More than just by testifying in song to her heterosexual desire for men, she represents a point of identification for gay men by offering up a subject position commonly devalued by dominant media as the "bad girl": welfare mother, prostitute, pregnant teen, etc. Donna Summer not only makes this connection explicit but celebrates it in her song "Bad Girls": "Now you and me are both the same/But we call ourselves by a different name." "Bad Girls," like so many other disco songs, seems to

---

[6] And certainly not the only element. There was, of course, the urbanization necessary for gay male identity as capitalism increasingly allowed men to live apart from family units. See John D'Emilio's landmark "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 467-476.

[7] I use the word "penetrates" in homage to Leo Bersani's idea of male anal sex as a death of a particular kind of subjectivity, one that AIDS has rendered all too literal. Hughes himself acknowledges Bersani's influence, especially in Hughes' analysis later in his essay of how AIDS has shifted disco's disciplinary discourse. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1988), 197-222.

offer the gay male dancer a challenge: in Hughes' words, "can a man, even or perhaps particularly a white one, possibly identify with this supposedly degraded subject position?" (152). In sum, it is in the oscillation between these poles – submission to non-narrative forms, the robotic beat felt within the body and the African-American diva as point of identification – that the post-Stonewall gay male subject is constituted.

Going back to Goodwin's praise of Arthur Baker, then, the distinction between modern and postmodern evaporates into irrelevancy, which Huyssen might have predicted[8], on the strobe-streaked plain of the dancefloor. Without a doubt, he makes a convincing argument for Baker turning "middle-of-the-road group Fleetwood Mac into modernist avant-gardists" in his remix work for them. Arthur Baker is indeed the auteur of his remix, i.e. one can easily recognize his stylistic idiosyncrasies on it. But this disregard for the way the "Big Love" remix is consumed raises some issues. First off, deeming Fleetwood Mac a "middle-of-the-road group" and leaving it at that ignores the band's own considerable modernist impulses.[9] Second, Baker has remixed "Big Love" ostensibly for play in clubs. This means that despite his undeniable authorial stamp, many of his choices were dictated by how a DJ uses a remix in the club. So Baker has extended outros and intros and isolated certain musical breaks in order to

---

[8] "The *Lebenswelt* of the 1970s and its cultural practices...in such major manifestations as the women's movement, the gay movement, and the ecology movement, seem to point beyond the culture of modernity, beyond avantgarde and postmodernism, and most certainly beyond neo-conservatism." (176)

[9] In his autobiography, Mick Fleetwood, drummer for Fleetwood Mac, writes a great deal about the maniacal dominance of band member Lindsey Buckingham over the recording of the band's 1979 album *Tusk*. Buckingham, drunk on punk and the ambient music of Brian Eno, moved the band's sound in a more experimental direction but one that merely served to place the spacey quirks of earlier, more popular albums like *Fleetwood Mac* and, especially, *Rumours*, into sharper relief. See Mick Fleetwood, *My Twenty-Five Years in Fleetwood Mac* (Hyperion, 1992); Fleetwood Mac, *Fleetwood Mac* (Warner Bros. Records, 1975); Fleetwood Mac, *Rumours* (Warner Bros. Records, 1977); Fleetwood Mac, *Tusk* (Warner Bros. Records, 1979).

provide the DJ with a track that will be easier to mix in with other tracks in the club. This is precisely how the beat is "turned around" in disco's disciplinary discourse discussed above. So the "Big Love" remix may not be Benjamin celebrating Fleetwood Mac but neither does it seem capable of sustaining a critique worthy of Adorno on the dancefloor.

Perhaps this is why the word "postmodern" does not appear anywhere in Hughes' essay. It hardly seems to matter which texts or practices are properly postmodern if one cannot take into account that they have allowed a *gay* mass to come face to face with itself, arguably for the first time. This rather insidious elision raises the imperative to test Huyssen and Goodwin in their roles as legitimating agents. In the context of dance music outlined above, their confidence-shaking theories have the effect of denying gay men their own legitimacy. In the context of *SPIN*, they have the effect of denying youth culture of the 1980s the same privilege. As the best American postmodern critic of the 1980s, John Leland was over-invested in postmodernity because at the very least it was his opportunity to get beyond the Boomer stranglehold on cultural if not financial capital.[10] Thus, his writing was always a transformed expression of a social struggle.

With the help of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the field of cultural production, it is this struggle I seek to reconstruct now. I turn to Bourdieu for two reasons. First because his analytical framework is largely transhistorical; if he can construct the field of cultural production of 19th French literature, for example, then the same framework can be used to construct the field of cultural production of 1980s popular music. But more importantly, I can use this

---

[10] Robert Christgau called Leland "the best American postmod critic (the best new American rock critic period)." Robert Christgau, "Decade: Rockism Faces The World," *Village Voice*, January, 2, 1990.

framework to arrive at the social conditions of production that get ignored in far too many accounts of the era's popular music.

For Bourdieu, the field of cultural production is structured by the distribution of capital in the form of external or specific profits (such as literary prestige). In other words, whatever criteria are brought to bear on the artistic value (and, by extension, the monetary value) of a particular work emanate from a social position occupied within power relations. If these criteria possess the force of common sense, it is largely dependent upon a formidable economic and political power authorizing them.

But any field of cultural production is also a field of struggles to set the terms for cultural value. As Bourdieu states it:

> The newcomers "get beyond" the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly denouncing it but by repeating and reproducing it in a sociologically non-congruent context, which has the effect of rendering it incongruous or even absurd, simply by making it perceptible as the arbitrary convention it is. (31)

So how did this field of struggles get played out in 1980s popular music? One way to reconstruct it is to stage it as a conflict between *SPIN,* the "newcomers," and *Rolling Stone,* a product of the 1960s counterculture but the keepers of the dominant mode of thought and expression in 1980s music criticism nevertheless. One group of writers is adhering to the terms that govern success in the field; another is trying to bend those terms in order to jumpstart their careers as journalists.

In *SPIN's* first annual Readers Poll from the October 1989 issue, for instance, writers Christian Wright and Robin Reinhardt praised *SPIN* readers for voting The Smiths' *The Queen Is Dead* as the Best Album of All Time as well as proving Elvis Costello wrong on Public Enemy's lack of large scale impact by

voting their 1988 album *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* as the No. 9 Best Album of All Time. "Like Public Enemy, but more successfully," wrote Wright and Reinhardt, "*SPIN*'s readers have staged a quiet revolution, stormed the palace and taken the crown...You are clearly calling the shots" (83). The crown, of course, belonged primarily to the 1960s counterculture and the poll results were explicitly interpreted along these lines, proclaiming in the very first sentence of the Poll "Case Study" that the 60s "officially, finally ended" with the death of Abbie Hoffman on April 12, 1989. (Reinhardt and Wright 83). With the assurance that their generational definitions had been received, *SPIN* could now ask defiantly "Who said the 80s have no identity?" (Reinhardt and Wright 83).

Who indeed? Just a month later, in the November 16th, 1989 issue of *Rolling Stone*, fourteen of the magazine's editors contributed to an article assessing "The 100 Best Albums of the Eighties." The introductory essay, printed with no byline but later revealed to be the work of longtime *Rolling Stone* scribe David Fricke, began with this phrase: "This has been the first rock & roll decade without a revolution, or true revolutionaries, to call its own" (No author "The 100 Best Albums of the Eighties"). Here the 1960s are very much alive if only by an ossification of countercultural rhetoric into a kind of oppressive consensus. By the 1980s certainly, *Rolling Stone* was clearly putting this rhetoric in the service of maintaining its hegemony as the music magazine with the highest circulation in America with all the attendant cultural and financial force that position affords.

Going back to Bourdieu, then, we can characterize one facet of the field of 1980s popular music in America as a perpetual jockeying by *SPIN* and *Rolling Stone* for a monopoly on what counts as legitimate discourse - who gets to call the shots; who can call musical history its own. So when Fricke aims to prove

the Eighties' lack of musical revolutions by proclaiming it "the decade of, among other things, synth pop, Michael Jackson, the compact disc, Sixties reunion tours, the Beastie Boys and a lot more heavy metal," the position from which he produces value (again, a dominant position) is being expressed through the position he takes on the music (No author "The 100 Best Albums of the Eighties"). This position-taking, as Bourdieu calls it, is not further elaborated by Fricke (undoubtedly solidifying it as "common sense"). Nevertheless, with his introduction of instruments ("*synth* pop") and recording formats ("the compact disc") as Eighties concerns, we can speculate two things: one, what makes the popular music of the Eighties so unrevolutionary to Fricke's ears is the suggestion that digital technology had somehow sapped the energy out of popular music; two, given how much digital technology contributed to black music idioms in the 1980s, black musicians were compromising their supposedly more direct modes of energy transferal, a mode epitomized by soul music in the 1960s. As Peter Guralnick explains in the *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, the audience for 1960s soul music comprised a group of people "expecting to work hard...their shouts, moans, groans and good-natured cries of approval indicated that they expected the singer to work hard, too."

This is precisely the arbitrary convention John Leland makes perceptible in a brilliant piece called "Temporary Music" for his August 1989 "Singles" column in *SPIN* - the "fraudulent conceit" of energy and hard work in recorded music.[11] "As a document of an event," he writes, "a record captures only what the musicians made, not how they made it." Just as we accept that two

---

[11] John Leland, "Singles: Temporary Music," *Spin*, August, 1989, p.87. Guralnick is discussing a live audience in his piece and Leland makes it clear that he is centering his argument on recorded music. Nevertheless, the increased use of recorded music in live shows of the era (e.g., Madonna's "Blonde Ambition" tour and, of course, any Milli Vanilli concert) suggests that there is no reason why Leland's argument could not be extended to include live music as well.

successive shots in a classical Hollywood film unfold in the same time and space, "we'll accept that if a record does a lot of work – if it makes a speaker cone move a lot of air – then the musicians must have put a great effort into it" (Leland, "Singles: Temporary Music" 87). The sweat behind punk singles, The Who's "Baba O'Riley" and Jackie Wilson's "Lonely Teardrops," to use Leland's examples, are all "product(s) of the technology that deliver (them);" there's nothing inherently organic or natural about the process (Leland, "Singles: Temporary Music" 87).

What puts this illusion into relief for Leland is the digital construction of two of his favorite singles from 1989, Paula Abdul's "Straight Up" and Milli Vanilli's "Girl You Know It's True.":

> Both are built almost entirely of samples or other computer data, constructed out of undigested matter. And both generate as much energy as the average Who or Guns N' Roses song. But neither feels like a monument for posterity, and neither conveys the sense of work on the part of the performers. (Leland, "Singles: Temporary Music" 87).

The mutability of digital musical information reveals the illusion of sweat and muscle in recorded music – the constructedness of "Straight Up," the cold efficiency with which the sampled beat of "Girl You Know It's True" snaps into place are foregrounded over the sense of the work involved in their construction, no matter how energetic the end results as songs may sound. So instead of writing off Paula Abdul or Milli Vanilli as insignificant, Leland uses this temporary music, this disposable music that "foreshadows and maybe even dictates its disappearance in its construction," to deconstruct the "naturalness" of any recorded experience and thus any claims of superiority that can be made on it (Leland, "Singles: Temporary Music" 87).

So now we can see the field of 1980s popular music partially as a site of struggles where a new hierarchy of values is being posited, values that are best understood as postmodern. Music comprised of "piece(s) of information, without author or history, accessible at the push of a button" can transfer just as much energy (and thus elicit just as much work from us) as an Otis Redding song (Leland, "Singles: Temporary Music" 87). And where the songs of Otis Redding or "Lonely Teardrops" or "Baba O'Riley" are deemed classics since they have withstood the test of time, the very impermanence and unoriginality of "Girl You Know It's True" become an ideal. But Leland was not only claiming Milli Vanilli and "the listening process they pair up against" as legitimate objects of discourse; he was also asserting his right to make claims in the first place (Leland, "Singles: Temporary Music" 87).

This claim-staking inevitably sets off what Bourdieu calls "the orthodox defense against the heretical transformation of the field" (42). Dave Marsh, a former editor at *Rolling Stone*, brings out the force of orthodox taste against *SPIN* in his book *The Heart of Rock & Soul – The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made*. Not surprisingly, Marsh takes issue with *SPIN*'s "100 Greatest Singles of All Time" list and their choice to place Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock's "It Takes Two" at number one, quoting critic David Hinckley's description of the placement "as the equivalent of a three-year-old shooting his mother with a squirt gun in order to get her attention."[12] Once again, we are left to speculate as to what is so accurate about Hinckley's description since Marsh approves it as common sense and moves on, as if it were somehow inherently impossible for "It Takes Two" to be the greatest single of all time (Marsh ranks it at 956). Furthermore, he attempts to delegitimize *SPIN*'s voice by assuming the choice

---

[12] Marsh, p. 606. Marsh calls John Leland an excellent critic in this entry. But he suspects Leland behind the choice of "It Takes Two" for number one and attributes the move to a misguided attempt to make a comment on ephemerality rather than basing it on any standard of greatness.

was based purely on shock tactics thus shutting down any other kind of pleasure than could be taken in the song.

And Marsh's sense of history is just as skewed as Milli Vanilli's. In an interview with Leland, Milli Vanilli could not trace the sampled beat of "Girl You Know It's True" (originally from a 1974 song called "Ashley's Roachclip" by the Soul Searchers) before its use in 1987 from the Coldcut remix of Eric B. and Rakim's "Paid in Full." They even go so far as to say that The Soul Searchers sampled it from Coldcut. But where Milli Vanilli fail to go back far enough in history, Marsh fittingly goes back too far. He claims that "It Takes Two" is a "clearly conscious reference to Marvin Gaye and Kim Weston's old hit (which Marsh ranks at 146),[13] lend(ing) it the very historicity that the magazine wants to deny" (606). But much of the song's musical content, including the chorus hook, was directly quoted and sampled from Lyn Collins' "Think (About It)" released in 1972, five years after the Marvin Gaye/Kim Weston hit. With his evocation of the mother and child metaphor, Marsh brings *SPIN*'s newcomer status to the fore. But he unwittingly reveals how difficult it is to bring genealogy to bear on digital music. History thus becomes an overdetermined process through which value and value-making positions are produced.

I have reconstructed these positions in part to answer a question Jameson has put forth concerning the social use of postmodernism:

> Why we needed the word postmodernism so long without knowing it, why a truly motley crew of strange bedfellows ran to embrace it the moment it appeared, are mysteries that will remain unclarified until we have been able to grasp the philosophical and social function of the concept, something impossible, in its turn, until we are somehow able to grasp the deeper identity between the two. (xiii)

---

[13] Marsh, p. 102.

Even though neither Leland nor most of the other *SPIN* writers ever used the word "postmodernism," they unquestionably embraced its tenets as philosophy. In the second chapter, then, I outlined the philosophical function of postmodernism. In this chapter, I have attempted to clarify the mystery of its social function. Using Bourdieu, I have tried to grasp the value of postmodernism for youth cultures in the 1980s. Leland and other writers at *SPIN*, in particular, used these ideas as identity-markers to set themselves off (and the music they critiqued) as unique and distinct. The difficulty of embarking on such a project under the tow of Boomer hegemony fueled the use value of postmodern ideas. There was now a set of philosophical tenets that could convey the experience of this difficulty to disparate social groups. Jameson recognizes, albeit in a somewhat snide manner, that a yearning for coalition building lies within the shorthand of postmodernism:

> The appeal to experience, otherwise so doubtful and untrustworthy - even though it does really seem as if any number of things had changed, perhaps for good! - now recovers a certain authority as what in retrospect, the new name allowed you to think you felt, because you now have something to call it that other people seem to acknowledge by themselves using the word. (xiii)

Far too many theorists of the postmodern neglect this marketplace of ideas. An analysis like Goodwin's is certainly worthwhile as far as it goes. But his nuanced critique stops at postmodernism's philosophical tenets and feels empty without a consideration of how these tenets were actually used. Therefore, I think it helps to view postmodernism as, among other things, a commodity and to trace its flow throughout a marketplace just like more tangible commodities. Such a vantage point would afford us a glimpse beyond the modernism-postmodernism debates into the actors who make a purchase on ideas. In a portrait of the

marketplace that echoes Jameson's, Jonathan Flatley views the commodity in precisely this fashion, affectionately pinning its status to social use:

> The recognition and love offered by the commodity is...especially comforting to women, African Americans, and other minoritized persons who had been historically unable to participate in the political public sphere. Consumption offers the limited possibility of managing one's embodiment...The ways that consumption promises this negotiation of embodiment and abstraction is, I think, immediately understandable to anyone who finds (as I do) shopping a potent antidepressant. Part of the affective payback of consumption is the way that in consuming a product we can identify ourselves with everyone else who consumes that product; we access another mode of universalizing ourselves and our desires. (117-118)

In the context of *SPIN*, postmodernism held forth the promise of embodying a young group of writers (and, by extension, the youth cultures their writing represented) as a recognizable social force. Consuming postmodern ideas in the pages of *SPIN* placed readers in a jet stream of affective energies that could connect them with others who consumed and espoused these ideas. This is finally why I go to such great lengths to identify the writing in *SPIN* as postmodern – embodiment was crucial to youth cultures of the 1980s who found themselves faced with forces that denied that such youth cultures could be embodied in the first place.

In any event, John Leland, at least, did indeed get beyond. He moved into prestigious positions as the music critic for *Newsweek* and editor of *Details*. Eventually, he became a senior editor at *Newsweek*. As of this writing, he is a reporter for *The New York Times*. But here the question of getting beyond into what should be posed by briefly looking a bit deeper into Flatley's notion of the

commodity. One could easily deem Flatley's analysis as postmodern. He underlines the importance of embracing commodity capitalism which places his analysis squarely in opposition to modernist critiques. But eventually, postmodern theorists will have to deal with the inequities of capitalism. If getting beyond modernism or Boomer hegemony only means the privilege of taking up prestigious positions at venerable journals, then this trajectory goes against the main impulses of postmodernism. The writing of Leland, for instance, ultimately sought to collapse a long series of dichotomies, all of which are inextricably bound up within the inequities of capitalism – dichotomies between high/low, rock/pop, booth/floor, performer/audience, and perhaps even critic/fan. I hasten to add at this point that the heroes of modernism failed to usher in this utopia and will therefore waste no time castigating postmodernists for failing to do so as well. With Jameson, I recognize the importance of utopian conceptions:

> Utopian representations knew an extraordinary revival in the 1960s; if postmodernism is the substitute for the sixties and the compensation for their political failure, the question of Utopia would seem to be a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all. (xvi)

But what the best writing in *SPIN* always made clear was that the question of Utopia necessarily involved a direct inquiry into the most crass commodity capitalism. So, in the next and final chapter, I will trace out the legacy of *SPIN* and the staying power of the arguments laid out in its pages. The writers who have learned the most from *SPIN* in the late 1980s posit that the capacity to imagine change must begin with a capacity to imagine the marketplace as something more than an amorphous, contaminating creature.

CHAPTER4: COGNITIVELY MAPPING THE POPULAR

James Lastra concludes his book *Sound Technology and the American Cinema* with a lengthy discussion of the uneasy introduction of sound engineers into classical Hollywood film production. Trained in sound reproduction for recordings and radio, these particular sound engineers adopted a model that simulated an "invisible auditor" placed at the ideal position of the camera. Thus, they focused more on the profilmic event rather than the effect film sound had on the audience. An "invisible auditor" microphone placed near the camera certainly maintained the integrity of the space being filmed. But it failed to pick up the voices of actors who were not always, or even frequently, positioned near the camera. This model proved untenable for a cinema that highlighted the intelligibility of the human voice above all other concerns. And so the realistic convention of vocal intelligibility in the classical Hollywood cinema style stems from an "unreal" recording of the space that contextualizes the voice. The import of Lastra's analysis is incalculable for an understanding of the social history of sound. On one level, the tensions that resulted between sound engineers and other film personnel merely helps recount how desperately the former tried to preserve the "purity" of the profilmic event (as in the practice of reducing reverberation by damping the walls of the set). But on another level, those tensions also reveal a fear of the inhuman in technology which lies at the root of such desperation:

> The impulse toward understanding representational or perceptual technologies as simulations of human capacities is balanced by the equally powerful recognition of the truly inhuman tendencies they just as surely embody. (Lastra, *Sound Technology* 221)

There is something of the modernism-postmodernism debate in this

fable. I would not want to hopelessly muddle an already bewildering debate by claiming that the sound engineers were operating under a modernist aesthetic while other film personnel indulged in a postmodern one. But the triumph of fakery (the classical Hollywood cinema's eventual adoption of the boom microphone that disrespects the profilmic event) over realism (the "invisible auditor" microphone that maintains the integrity of the space around the camera) does recall the (at least temporary) postmodern triumph of, for example, producer Frank Farian propping up Rob Pilatus and Fabrice Morvan as the "real" singers of Milli Vanilli's songs. And as with the sound engineers' disdain for recording techniques that forsake verisimilitude, critiques of postmodernism palm off of fears of the inhuman and the types of work the inhuman can replace or obliterate.

It seems that if one seeks to drain the novelty from postmodernism, one must shift the focus to production whereas celebrants of postmodernism tend to focus on consumption. This is certainly how it plays out with Goodwin and Leland. Goodwin traces the survival of modernity within the quintessentially postmodern genre of 1980s digital dance music by analyzing the claims to authorship and creativity from its producers. Conversely, Leland focuses largely on consumption, on how digitalization allows music to be moved around by the consumer (or the producer-as-consumer). He embraces the death of the author and the authorial blankness behind the art of freestyle, new disco or house. Furthermore, he confuses the concept of work in his "Temporary Music" piece. Even in discussing artists who make a virtue of their hard work, like Debbie Gibson, he emphasizes the way she freezes time rather than labors within it.

This either/or type of epistemological struggle supports Jameson's notion that:

every position on postmodernism in culture - whether apologia or

stigmatization - is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today. (3)

For it is multinational capitalism that exacerbates all those dichotomies between modernism and postmodernism, producer and consumer. With each technological breakthrough pumped by multinational capitalism, there is a corresponding fear that the new technology (whether the advent of sound in Hollywood cinema or the digital production of popular music of the 1980s) will collapse these dichotomies and potentially eliminate our sources of income. In an analysis of future shock novels, Jameson correctly labels this fear as

the fear...of proletarianization, of slipping down the ladder, of losing a comfort and a set of privileges which we tend to increasingly think of in spatial terms: privacy, empty rooms, silence, walling other people out, protection against crowds and other bodies. (285)

In the following section, I want to examine how this fear gets played out in popular music discourse by taking an extended look at R.J. Warren Zanes' excellent essay "Too Much Mead? Under The Influence (of Participant-Observation)." For the most part, commercialism is conceived as the enemy and a healthy distance from the marketplace becomes an ideal. I want to show up the limitations of this approach and to suggest that a truly revolutionary cultural politics can only move forward by overcoming these fears.

***

Even though Zanes' essay focuses on consumption, he arrives at many of the same conclusions as Goodwin. No doubt his stint in popular music production (he was guitarist for 1980s roots rockers The Del Fuegos) has guided some of his ideas. Nevertheless, his essay serves somewhat as a corrective to Goodwin's vendetta against postmodernism's claims to novelty.

For sure, Zanes' goal is not to deny the very existence of postmodernism which is what seems to drive Goodwin. Instead, he takes issue with cultural studies' predilection for conceiving of consumption as an active, appropriative act suffused with irony. He rightly claims that this shift stems from the overall devalued position of popular music within academia and beyond:

> Portrayals of rock culture as a suitable home for ironic play have been less
> responses to conditions in rock cultural settings than to both the dim
> view of popular culture and the valorization of traditional curricula
> associated with certain factions within the conservative right. (Zanes 65)

This is indeed an important point. But as this thesis has hopefully demonstrated by this point, that dim view of popular culture often comes from within popular culture itself. The tensions between *Rolling Stone* and *SPIN* pivot on a high/low art distinction within mass culture. Zanes acknowledges this apparent contradiction by quoting Anthony DeCurtis' disdain for much of the popular music of the 1980s. For DeCurtis, unsurprisingly a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*, the past (namely, punk and before) is less rife with sellouts and thus authenticity can be measured by how well one adheres to this past. Successive generations are then blamed for the sickness of popular culture, with a nice escape clause for Nirvana, the archetypal grunge rock band and the one that adheres most snugly to this mythical past. Zanes quotes DeCurtis because he wants to establish various competing discourses on authenticity which are central to his argument. Nevertheless, Zanes' analysis succumbs to shortcomings similar to those of DeCurtis by failing to account for popular musics wherein the concept of selling out causes no anxiety.

I will discuss these shortcomings later. For now, I want to delve deeper into Zanes' critique of ironic consumption. In Zanes' view, this preoccupation of cultural studies holds no water because it assumes a stable identity from which

to perform active acts of consumption. Without a stable identity, there would be nothing in place to prevent the appropriator from drowning entirely in a socially useful ironic costume or performance. By contrast, Zanes posits that popular music offers the (usually young) insecure and/or self-alienated listening subject figures of identification to ward off the threat of alienation. Fantasy, rather than ironic distance, provides the subject with an authentic self:

> While something like sampling often involves an ironic mode of quotation, and examples of irony as a practice extend well beyond this celebrated instance, ironic distance is decidedly incompatible with the larger promises popular music culture offers the subject. (39)

Those larger promises invariably center on authenticity. Popular music discourse obsessively fixes the authenticity of performers in order to confer that authenticity on the fans. Here we have the familiar modernist impulse of aspiring to the integrity and/or genius of the artist in question. Even a film like *Sonic Outlaws*, which aims to celebrate the postmodern practices of dance music DJs, ultimately gives voice to this impulse: "Despite the film's celebration of appropriation as practice, the authenticity of the performers is claimed on familiar, modernist terms." (42)

Zanes defines authenticity as a distance from commerce and the selling out into it. But by the 1980s, it became increasingly difficult to determine the boundaries of commerciality. Genres like new wave and rap seemed to permanently dismantle the foundation of authenticity in popular music, precisely the quality Leland praised in his "Temporary Music" piece. Who could possibly claim authenticity after a decade of artists scratching records, adopting gender-bent personae and making videos? As a result, popular music falls down in what Lastra calls "the abyss of absolute indeterminacy," best known as postmodernism ("Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound" 85). And yet

Zanes would find no paradox in claims of authenticity made within this black hole of meaning:

Rather than argue that antifoundationalism leads to a frightening relativism (wherein all positions become equal and any discourse of authenticity is rendered hollow rather than hallowed), it seems more important to question whether it merely reconfigures authenticity under new guiding terms consistent with this particular epistemic moment. Indeed, a new authenticity does emerge from the critical play with romantic or classical authenticities that has come to be associated with postmodernism, an admittedly elastic rubric under which New Romanticism and (artist Richard) Prince can both find a home. (51)

Contrary to Goodwin, Zanes at the very least recognizes "the critical play with romantic or classical authenticities" as postmodern, as something new. So his analysis finally gets us beyond most generational anxiety. But he does share with Goodwin a preoccupation with discovering outposts of modernism within the postmodern (again, with the crucial distinction that Zanes recognizes the postmodern as such). The New Romantics, for instance, maintained an authenticity quite in keeping with the tenets of modernism through the use of irony:

With the media being a main component of the commercial network against which classical authenticity is defined, irony allows one to enter into the dark heart of commerce in order to manipulate it from within...The notion of a self-conscious, knowing performativity thus becomes central, finally allowing one to take on the features of the sellout while maintaining authenticity through the acknowledgment that it is all, finally, play. (Zanes 52)

Zanes uses U2 (in their hyper self-conscious incarnation in the 1990s) and The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion as further examples of this procedure. Under the influence of Baudrillard and the ambient production techniques of

Brian Eno, the Irish band U2 deconstructed their past as pretentious meaning-mongers and transformed themselves into the ironic creators of their own multimedia circus. Jon Spencer already had a history in popular music deconstruction with Pussy Galore, a band that reduced rock and roll to such bare elements that the music scarcely came across as rock and roll (or anything but horrible noise) at times. In the 1990s, Spencer took the training he had in semiotics as a Brown dropout and applied it to his new band, The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion. Here, he toyed with racist stereotypes in an attempt to destabilize racial signifiers in popular music. In both cases, irony affords the artist a distance from the machinery of the marketplace. They are the authors and owners of their constructions rather than having their constructions thrust upon them by commerce. Commercialism remains the enemy:

(Rock culture) maintains a link with an otherwise faded myth of recognition, and this by persistently envisioning an authenticity that can be reached by overcoming the foreign body of commercialism, whether by physical distance, temporal distance, or ironic distance. (Zanes 61)

Without a doubt, U2 and The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion have flushed out this contagion. So have shakier cases like The Pet Shop Boys and all of the DJs and remixers Goodwin dotes on. Even Madonna functions in a similar manner which may help explain her career longevity. But is this how Milli Vanilli works? Paula Abdul? Lisa Lisa? Sa-Fire? Debbie Gibson? Tiffany? New Kids on the Block? Kriss Kross? House acts like Phuture? Maurice? Jomanda? Black Box? Or even more recognizable dance divas like Tramaine? Dhar Braxton? Juliet Roberts? Cece Peniston? All of these acts have been either manipulated by commerce, willfully or otherwise, or can barely be said to even exist. In the latter instance, their personalities are simply not available to mobilize the need that Zanes sees as fundamental to popular music:

The need to suppose authenticity in an Other - put simply, the need to declare that an act's authenticity is inseparable from the fantasy that such authenticity might be conferred on oneself as a subject - is ultimately a deep-seated subjective need that has found a particularly powerful home in popular music culture, and this does not simply drop out when a particular model of authenticity, such as the classical, is challenged. (52)

How could one suppose authenticity in, to choose a particularly extreme example, Black Box? Black Box were a bank of Italian producers who constructed a screeching Italo disco fantasia in 1989 by digitally ripping out vocal lines from Loleatta Holloway's 1980 "Love Sensation" and reassembling them with the bassline from S-Express' "Theme From S-Express" along with other florid elements. The song (named "Ride on Time" because the producers misheard Holloway singing "Right on time") became a dancefloor smash and its success prompted the need for a full-length for which the producers enlisted the aid of vocalist Martha Wash. Following dance music custom, the woman who appeared on the cover of the resulting album, *Dreamland*, had nothing to do with the recording. Even when, after a lawsuit, Wash was properly credited and compensated as the vocalist of such Black Box smashes as "Everybody Everybody," "I Don't Know Anybody Else," and "Strike It Up," the elusive model Katrin Quinol stood in for Wash in videos, photo shoots and 12" single covers. Could Black Box possibly radiate enough of an ideal ego to confer authenticity on anyone?

Or we can take a less extreme example in Aaliyah. Aaliyah was an R&B singer in the late 1990s. She cut a recognizable presence in videos and interviews and later in films like *Romeo Must Die* and *Queen of the Damned*. But Aaliyah never came off as the auteur of her music. That designation went to her

blithely experimental producer Timbaland. Furthermore, she projected bland business acumen more than stormy artistic temperament. As a result, Aaliyah came off as a rather ghostly cipher on the popular music landscape, even though her singles repeatedly hit the top ten of Billboard' R&B charts. Simon Reynolds pins down this elusive aspect of Aaliyah in a way that links up beautifully with Zanes' conception of the needs of popular music fans:

> Somehow the idea of an "Aaliyah fan" seems faintly absurd. There's dozens of websites devoted to the singer whose name is Swahili for "most exalted one", but beyond her obvious beauty and vocal skill, what are these folk latching onto? The sites are uniformly thin on biographical content or back story. Of all the premier league R&B goddesses, Aaliyah seems the most blank: she doesn't even have a persona as such, let alone exhibit actual this-is-me personality. (Reynolds no page)

So if U2 or The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion take on the features of the sellout, the ironic distance needed to achieve this end implicitly acknowledges the existence of a bonafide non-ironic sellout. I would posit Black Box and Aaliyah as proof of that existence and add that these were the types of acts Leland wrote about most frequently (indeed, he reviewed "Ride on Time" quite early on). And given the lack of ironic distance (or much of any kind of distance, for that matter) in these acts, one is forced to wonder if they mobilize any fantasy of authenticity, at least in the way Zanes defines it. For sure, fans of Black Box or Aaliyah are never wedged apart by the differing levels of competency in reading so central to the appreciation of the music of U2 or The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion:

> Too often, the dupe who fails to see the irony is often the one who has not learned its language, and privileging those who have learned its

language is merely to buttress a privilege that is already secure. (Zanes 55)

Leland would have never written anything similar of Black Box or Milli Vanilli fans. It would not have made sense, for one thing, since irony has no bearing on how this music articulates desire. By contrast, U2 and the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion mean to mean; their songs demand an interpretive mode of listening that elicits and rewards an ability to detect irony.

Zanes' analysis moves past these oversights, and subsequently becomes most useful, when he begins a discussion on the survival of one master narrative in the head-swimming relativism of postmodernism: the American Dream. Rock culture's ideal images foster not only the fantasy of a whole self but also the dream of social elevation. Rock stars and their lifestyles exacerbate feelings of discontent in their fans. They provoke us with the hope that we can all improve our current conditions. Many of the non-ironic sellouts mentioned above undoubtedly function in a similar manner. Aaliyah, for instance, satisfies this role if only by her saturation across a variety of media: radio, music videos, films, magazines, etc. The heavy repetition of Aaliyah's image and music puts her achievements and acquisitions on display and makes them available for the potential motivation of her fans.

But, as always, Zanes measures this wager of democracy, as he so brilliantly puts it, by how far away from the commercial an artist can produce. And, as always, the artist needs to maintain that distance in order to confer a sense of authenticity upon the fans:

> Just as Lacan's mirror stage introduces an ideal ego that functions as a promise of potential wholeness (among other things, of course), so too establishing the authentic is forever about demarcating the possibilities of a subject's future. (Zanes 62)

But could we not conclude that Leland demarcated the possibility of his future, at least, by establishing the inauthentic? Did he not launch a successful career in journalism precisely by pinpointing how some hip-hop and dance acts make hay of authenticity? And from there, we might wonder what role authenticity serves for the largely gay fans of Black Box and the largely black fans of Aaliyah. If we recall Flatley's argument, disenfranchised groups do not seek distance from commercialism. How dark is the heart of commerce for the many gay men and black girls whose participation in the public sphere is often fraught with tension if not outright danger? Therefore, we might conclude that many of the music fans within these disenfranchised groups seek out artists who aggressively pursue the commercial.

Thus little about Aaliyah, for one, conveys distance from the commercial. Many of her songs, including the best reviewed and probably most popular "Are You That Somebody?," were featured on movie soundtracks and the videos shamelessly advertise clips from the films, thus underlining the video's function as a commercial. The songs themselves sound more like a supermarket of odd sounds rather than organic composition. Even the many silences created by Timbaland's stuttering, stop-and-start rhythms carry an implication of the beat and, in fact, strengthen it so that no moment is left uncrammed with sonic information.

Black Box certainly made Martha Wash a more visible presence in dance music circles, and sometimes beyond, in the early 1990s. But it seems highly unlikely that their music offers ideal egos especially while dancing to it in clubs, even with knowledge of Wash's involvement in its production. Even using the word "their" in the previous sentence feels awkward, so anonymous are the personalities blasting out from the clubland speakers. The music fuses perfectly with Hughes' description of the blankness of the personae and lyrical

sentiments of most dance music. The very title "Everybody Everybody" suggests a repetitious emptying of meaning. In its place arises the ever-present beat, amplified to ear-splitting levels in clubs so that dancers can literally feel it within their bodies. Sounds are brought as close to us as possible in a club. This extreme lessening of distance culminates Benjamin's notion about the propensity for film and mechanical reproduction in general to bring objects closer to consumers, with the distance traversed potentially overcoming the social inequities lording over access to auratic, cultish originals. And, as Benjamin emphasized, the resulting closeness provided the occasion to bring large groups of people together in one space.

Undoubtedly, some theorists could detect authenticity at work in the peculiar logics of Aaliyah and Black Box, most likely in the figure of the DJ who becomes a new ego ideal embodying talent and the wage of democracy. I have less than no interest in following this course if the final destination means to posit authenticity as a universal. Such detours merely add fuel to dead-end modernism vs. postmodernism feuds. Furthermore, they tend to flatten out the complexities of popular music, smoothing over its seemingly incompatible currents. For finally, Zanes' analysis only applies to rock (as opposed to pop) acts and thus succumbs to rockism: "Within rock culture, a fantasy of intrinsic authenticity requires that the commercial be kept alive as rock culture's 'foreign body,' the prerequisite fantasy that keeps the engine in motion" (Zanes 64). But this conclusion works only insofar as Zanes understands that his analysis concerns rock culture as distinct from other cultures within popular music. The overall problem with Zanes' piece is that he uses "rock culture" and "popular music" (as a whole, one musts assume) interchangeably, ignoring the stratification that increasingly characterizes post-1960s popular music. Rock acts that signify via their distance from the commercial, for instance, also aim

to distance themselves from those acts for whom the term "sell out" makes no sense, so total is their immersion in commerce.

It is this persistent failure to theorize the commercial as anything more than an undifferentiated mass, collapsing Black Box into Aaliyah and their respective fans into one another, that renders Leland's work so rich. Unsullied by a fear of slipping down into an amorphous proletariat, Leland's writing articulated pop logic in an attempt to get beyond the vagaries of rockism. For it is rockism that most successfully maintains those borders between performer/audience, etc. in popular music and makes its own significant contribution to the inequities of multinational capitalism. And it is only through an engagement with the popular that a cultural politics can begin to chip away at such a monolithic system. So after much griping and hand-wringing, Jim Finnegan arrives at a hard-won conclusion that Leland took for granted all along:

> The bottom line from...*Spin*'s perspective seems to be...: if you really want to have a progressive riot (or a cultural revolution), first you have to assemble a crowd. And you can only do that by reaching out to Others, even to those (or perhaps especially to those), who threaten to incorporate your slogans, your "look," and your politics into their own agendas and their own practices and pleasures of everyday life; and you can only do that if you're willing to work in the mediums of the popular. (Finnegan no page)

The imperative to engage with the popular comes as a revelation to Finnegan only because his essay centers on Riot Grrrl, the most punk-like and politically outspoken genre of the early 1990s. Riot Grrrl suffered many anxieties over the popular, from media blackouts to strident separatism. Leland, by contrast, knew fully well that politics existed beyond such insular and mostly economically privileged realms because he wrote extensively on "the mediums

of the popular." He recognized the radical potential in those markers that set off a pop aesthetic from the rockist quagmire: the death of the author, the proximity to commerce, the proximity to fans, the use of the music as mobile background, etc.

Still, it would be foolish to posit that a pop aesthetic automatically results in Utopian impulses. As Will Straw has shown in his well-titled essay, "The Booth, The Floor and The Wall: Dance Music and The Fear of Falling," the dichotomies that plague rock culture get replicated in dance music culture as well:

> The spatial relationship between floor and booth has stood metaphorically for the gap between Low and High – for the distance between a populism which might at any moment become vulgar and a connoisseurship which imagines itself the custodian of historical rationality. (250-1)

I would add that this relationship stands metaphorically as well for the tensions between postmodernism and modernism. As with Goodwin, "dance music professionals construct protective walls against vulgarity by insisting that the meaningful processes are those which go on out of sight, off the dance floor itself" (Straw, 250). But Straw moves beyond using this notion merely as a pretext for shaking the confidence of postmodernism celebrants. Instead, he uncovers the very real economic roots to the disdain for (postmodern) dancers on the part of (modern) DJs. When disco split off into myriad subgenres in the early 1980s, the wider spread popularity of dance music swelled into a serious threat to the way DJs conceived of their métier. Far from catering to dancefloor taste, DJs strived "to enact and register shifts of style" (Straw 250). Populism inevitably corrupted this ideal as different groups of people sought different uses for dancing, often completely incompatible with the concerns of the DJ.

But booth-floor tensions could just as easily boil up from the inability or unwillingness of DJs to reconceive their profession as from the expansion and proliferation of dance music markets. In order to function more efficiently within the fragmented dance scenes of the 1980s, DJs may have had to move into self-proscribed genres and social settings. In general, it seemed as if DJs increasingly became victim to a failure of cognitive mapping. And as Jameson notes, contact with mass groups of people, like the hordes of revelers on the dancefloor, potentially hinders our capacity to imagine life outside of our own experiences:

> We need to explore the possibility that there exists, in what quaintly used to be called the moral realm, something roughly equivalent to the dizziness of crowds for the individual body itself: the premonition that the more people we recognize, even within the mind, the more peculiarly precarious becomes the status of our own hitherto unique and 'incomparable' consciousness or "self." (358)

If dance music advertises any politics, it certainly lies with its ability to disturb or destroy this sense of self. Launching off from Hughes' argument, the experience of feeling the beat within the body contains productive potential for dismantling the self and then creating coalitions between previously "incomparable" selves. Nevertheless, we need to take into account the failure of cognitive mapping as a measure of the gaps that separate booth and floor, producer and consumer, rock and pop, etc. For, as Jameson summarizes:

> The incapacity to map spatially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience. It follows that an aesthetic of cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project. (416)

I detect in Leland's writings the seeds of this project. The need to

systematically articulate a pop aesthetic was an initial necessary step in displaying popular music's stratification in order to dismantle it. In short, Leland was trying to articulate the logics of various popular music genres and scenes. Will Straw attempted something similar in his "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music." Like Leland, Straw seems to find the biggest potential for alliance building in dance music scenes via a contrast with alternative rock music culture:

> One reason why coalitions of musical taste which run from British dance culture through black communities in Toronto and significant portions of the young female market are possible is that these constituencies are all ones which value the redirective and the novel over the stable and canonical, or international circuits of influence over the mining of a locally stable heritage...One need neither embrace the creation of such alliances as a force for social harmony or condemn them as politically distracting to recognize their primacy in the ongoing politics of popular musical culture. ("Systems" 385)

My impression is that Straw very much wants to embrace such alliances as a force for social harmony since he offers little evidence of their being politically distracting. The formidable challenge then becomes how to cognitively map not just within scenes but between them. But there are indications that popular music criticism has taken Leland's lead and begun the process of cognitive mapping. So in the final pages, I want to take a look at some of the directions criticism has taken in the years since *SPIN*.

<center>***</center>

In a quite moving 2003 year-end roundup, Michaelangelo Matos, music editor for The Seattle Times, has excoriated *Rolling Stone* for their December 11, 2003 issue showcasing the "500 Greatest Albums of All Time."

Unsurprisingly and depressingly, their list mimicked other such lists from the past, with four Beatles albums in the top ten and *Sgt. Pepper* mindlessly perched at number one:

> The most disheartening thing about the *Stone* list is that (it) exemplif(ies) the thought-freezing "If it isn't happening to me, it isn't happening" school of criticism. But pop music is too constantly in flux to stand still; that's why it's worth engaging as something more active than a mummified history lesson. If I learned anything in 2003—for me a year of upheaval and overwork, of too much to do and not enough time to hear everything I wanted to—it's that if it isn't happening to me, it probably *is* happening, and that I'd better spend 2004 trying to catch up. (Matos no page)

> From "(The 1980s are) the first rock & roll decade without a revolution, or true revolutionaries, to call its own" to "if it isn't happening to me, it probably *is* happening" is a long journey indeed. Here, the relief of the postmodern in late 1980s *SPIN* comes full circle. Matos' conclusion demonstrates an ability, or at least a willingness, to cognitively expand into scenes and genres outside of his immediate experience and thus side-step the blind spots of rockism. The Riot Grrrl scene, for one, lacked precisely this competency in mapping, failing to recognize its importance to building coalitions in a radical cultural project. Of course, if that project includes the struggle to eradicate the dichotomies fostered by rockism and multinational capitalism, we might want to reconsider the last line of Matos' screed. We have to take into account the extent to which "catching up" feeds into the maintenance of multinational capitalism and preserves a dichotomy that has heretofore gone unmentioned – the division between fans and critics (or "professional fans," as Frith terms it) (*Sound Effects* 177).

For a glimpse of what a truly socialist popular music might look like, one potentially unrecuperable by capitalist concerns, we have to turn to a brief review of the *Barbie Hit Mix* album written earlier in 2004 by Joshua Clover for the *Village Voice*. Clover, it should be noted, became the Singles columnist for *SPIN* in the late 1990s, under his pseudonym Jane Dark, and was truly the heir to many of Leland's ideas. He vigorously pursued a pop aesthetic and gravitated towards musics that attempted to close the gap between performer and audience. In a way, *Barbie Hit Mix* achieved the latter more successfully than techno's murder of the author.   Released by Kid Rhino Records, *Barbie Hit Mix* was an album of songs "made popular by" such artists as Outkast and Britney Spears but performed by anonymous children. "The pretense being," as Clover writes, "these songs are sung by Barbie herself, and just happen to sound pretty much exactly like the originals" (Clover no page). Clover is writing these words in the context of the great teenpop explosion of the late 1990s. Reaching its apotheosis in 1997, with the rabid success of boy bands like The Backstreet Boys and *NSync as well as alarmingly young superstars like Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, teenpop shifted American popular music history from the grunge era of irony and market anxiety to a shrewdly careerist embrace of populism. By 2004, however, teen pop was losing steam as album sales by The Backstreet Boys, Spears and Aguilera failed the match previous highs and *NSync member Justin Timberlake pushed teenpop past its "sell by" date with a remarkable album, 2002's *Justified*, that promised career longevity and auteur status. *Barbie Hit Mix* impels Clover to focus on what will happen with the fans of teenpop now that their moment in the historical sun seems to have come to an end:

> I'd prefer to see this as the first apparition of revolution. The epoch is
> over anyway; the world's perfectly sensible teenpop fans can return to

dancing with themselves and singing into brush-handles without having to be the Main Topic of Culture. Shouldn't this be background music to kid's lives, rather than kids being background fill for TRL? No more "famous stars," no more "brand names," no roles for Barbie-lookin' icons. Now we just have to lose Barbie, once she completes her main task of persuading grups (sic) to turn their attention elsewhere. This is a transitional gig, and Babs should dissolve into history soon, no big whoop. *Barbie Hit Mix* is a supersession all right: the supersession of bourgeois individualism, and the collectivizing of popular art. Nothing to see here, move along. (Clover no page)

On the much smaller level of popular music, *Barbie Hit Mix*'s dispersal of rigid artistic identities into one collective voice (as well as Clover's call for the long over-due death of Barbie) has corrected the failings of the League of Black Revolutionary Voters, as Jameson sees them, in larger social arenas. In Detroit in the late 1960s, the League of Black Revolutionary Voters seemed poised to start a workers' revolution by wielding considerable influence over industry power and electoral politics. But ironically, the organization started to lose it effectiveness when representatives tried to spread their model beyond the city limits into Europe:

> The jet-setting militants of the league had become media stars; not only were they becoming alienated from their local constituencies, but, worse than that, nobody stayed home to mind the store. Having acceded to a larger spatial plane, the base vanished under them; and with this the most successful social revolutionary experiment of that rich political decade in the United States came to a sadly undramatic end. (Jameson 414)

The jet-setting militants in this scenario bear a strong resemblances to the rock stars who flaunt their ideal egos and they both pose problem for

collectivization. *Barbie Hit Mix* holds forth the promise that popular music, at least, can bypass the alienation engendered by stardom. A collectivized popular music can reduce the chasm between performer and audience into ever-shifting, rhizomatic alliances which encourage cognitive mapping rather than prematurely short-circuit it.

Of course, collectivization would destroy the very pop-like pleasure of immersion in commerce that an Aaliyah advertises. We would be forced to consider the fate of an artist like Prince whose persona and music depend so much on the performer-audience gap. In an interview with Chris Heath, Prince collaborator Martika addresses the extreme difficulties Heath encountered in getting Prince to acquiesce to an interview: "If he was rude, so what? You can excuse all that, you must excuse all that, because what it allows to exist-his music-is ultimately much more important" (Heath no page). Indeed, the rudeness becomes an ideal, as Leland suggests in an earlier piece on Prince: "His excesses are directed inward, excused by his talent rather than shared through it" (Leland, "Singles" February 1989, 83). Leland excuses Prince's excesses because he celebrates the allure of celebrity and the benefits of media immersion. But ultimately, these ideals run counter to a project that seeks to end modernist mystification and the dichotomies that uphold it. Bringing an end to Prince's denial of access, to his intensification of the aura surrounding him, might spell the end to the pleasure we take in his music and condemn us to the more direct, unambiguous myths Leland associates with Bruce Springsteen by contrast. But as Firth reminds us,

> Culture as transformation...must challenge experience, must be difficult, must be *unpopular*. There are, in short, political as well as sociological and aesthetic reasons for challenging populism. The problem is how to do this while appreciating the popular, taking it seriously on its own terms...The

"difficult" appeals through the traces it carries of another world in which it would be "easy." The utopian impulse, the *negation* of everyday life, the aesthetic impulse Adorno recognized in high art, must be part of low art too. (*Performing Rites* 20)

The writing of John Leland and others in *SPIN* magazine of the late 1980s helped to keep this utopian impulse alive by taking the popular seriously on its own terms. What set him apart from previous popular music critics such as Ellen Willis, Robert Christgau, Vince Aletti and Tom Smucker who embraced the popular in the 1960s and the 1970s was, of course, the peculiar historical context in which he was writing. But despite the historical challenges faced by popular music critics of the 1980s, the politics at *SPIN* magazine in this era were far from utopian. Writers such as Byron Coley and Nick Tosches, for instance, found room at *SPIN* to voice their disdain for, respectively, the popular and the music of the 1980s in general. Even more damning, in 1994, a sexual harassment suit was brought against the publisher, Bob Guccione Jr. And the portrait of Leland himself that I have fashioned gives off the impression that he never greeted the popular with a certain modicum of wariness. He was, after all, the first journalist to reveal the Milli Vanilli "fraud" which dealt a serious blow to his postmodern credentials. Nevertheless, the ideas espoused by Benjamin in his "Work of Art" essay found a welcome home in Leland's writings. The democratization Benjamin detected in mechanical reproduction and Leland in digital fostered the hope that a true democratization could occur on all social levels. The problem facing any kind of radical popular music politics is whether or not such a state could be attained within a capitalist society. And if it cannot, will the benefits of such a project outweigh the pleasure that will necessary be lost in the newly transformed culture?

WORKS CITED

Adorno, Theodor. "Freudian Theory and The Pattern of Fascist Propaganda." *The Culture Industry.* J. M. Bernstein, ed. London: Routledge, 1991).

Author Interview with John Leland. March 19, 2004.

Benjamin, Walter. "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." *Illuminations.* Hannah Arendt, ed. New York: Schocken, 1968. 217-51.

Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism.* Douglas Crimp, ed. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1988. 197-222.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production.* New York: Columbia University Press), 1993.

Calhoun, Craig. "Habitus, field, and capital; the question of historical specificity." *Bourdieu; critical perspectives.* Eds Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993. 61-88.

Cavanagh, David. *The Creation Records Story: My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize.* London: Virgin, 2000.

Christgau, Robert. *Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s.* New York: Pantheon, 1990.

———. "Decade: Rockism Faces The World." *Village Voice*, January, 2, 1990: 24-8.

———. *Rock Albums of the '70s: A Critical Guide.* New York: Da Capo, 1981.

Christgau, Robert and Julian Dibbell. "Classic Rock." *Details.* July, 1991: 104-7.

Clover, Joshua. "Side Stage." *Village Voice.* <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0415/jclover.php> (August 8, 2004).

Decurtis, Anthony and James Henke, eds. *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll.* New York: Random House, 1992. 264.

D'Emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader.* Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, eds. New York: Routledge, 1993. 467-476.

Finnegan, Jim. "Theoretical Tailspins: Reading "Alternative" Performance in *Spin* Magazine." *Postmodern Culture.* 10:1 September 1999. No page.

Flatley, Jonathan. "Warhol Gives Good Face: Publicity and the Politics of Prosopopoeia." Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz, eds. *Pop Out Queer Warhol.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Fleetwood, Mick. *My Twenty-Five Years in Fleetwood Mac.* New York: Hyperion, 1992.

Frith, Simon. *Music for Pleasure,* Cambridge: Polity, 1988.

———. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music.* Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP, 1996.

———. *Sound Effects,* New York: Pantheon, 1981.

Frith, Simon and Howard Horne. Art Into Pop. London: Methuen, 1987.

Goodwin, Andrew. "Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction." *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word.* Ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin. New York: Pantheon, 1990. 258-73.

Grossberg, Lawrence, "Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life." Lawrence Grossberg. *Dancing in Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. 29-63.

———. "Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care? On 'The State of Rock.'" *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture.* Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, eds. New York   and London: Routledge, 1994.

———. "Is There Rock After Punk?" *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word.* Ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin. New York: Pantheon, 1990. 441-9.

Grover, Jan Zita. "AIDS: Keywords." *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism.* Douglas Crimp, ed. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1988. 17-30.

Habermas, Jurgen. "Modernity: An Incomplete Project." *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture.* Hal Foster, ed. Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983. 3-15.

Heath, Chris. "The Man Who Would Be Prince." *Details.* November 1991. <http://princetext.tripod.com/i_details91.html> (August 8, 2004).

Hughes, Walter. "In The Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco." *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture.* Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, eds. New York and London: Routledge, 1994. 147-157.

Huyssen, Andreas. "The Search for Tradition: Avantgarde and Postmodernism in the 1970s." Andreas Huyssen. *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, 160-177.

Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

Jones, LeRoi. *Black Music.* New York: Apollo Editions, 1968.

Keightley, Keir. "Reconsidering Rock." *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock.* Ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street. Cambridge (UK):Cambridge UP, 2001. 109-42.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "Cult of Distraction." *The Mass Ornament.* Thomas Y. Levin, ed. Massachusettes: Harvard University Press, 1995. 323-8.

Lastra, James. "Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound." Altman, Rick, ed., *Sound Theory Sound Practice.* New York and London: Routledge, 1992.

———. *Sound Technology and the American Cinema.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Leland, John. "Baby It's You." *SPIN.* March 1988: 23-5.

———. "Singles." *SPIN.* January 1988: 32.

———. "Singles." *SPIN.* February 1988: 92.

———. "Singles." *SPIN.* February 1989: 83.

———. "Singles: Temporary Music," *SPIN.* August 1989: 87.

Marsh, Dave. *The Heart of Rock & Soul.* New York: Plume, 1989. 606-7.

Matos, Michaelangelo. "The Year of The Non Album." *Seattle Weekly.* December 31, 2003 - January 6, 2004.
<http://www.seattleweekly.com/features/0353/031231_music_jayz.php>
(August 8, 2004).

No author. No title. *SPIN.* May 1985: 7.

No author. *Rolling Stone's 100 Best Albums of the Eighties.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

No author. "The 100 Best Albums of the Eighties." *Rolling Stone.* November 16, 1989: 53.

Owen, Frank. "Post Modern." *SPIN.* October 1989: 20.

———. "Singles." *SPIN.* January 1990: 81.

Petro, Patrice. "After Shock, Between Boredom and History." Patrice Petro. *Aftershocks of the New.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002. 57-81.

Powers, Anne. "Rancid." Village Voice. April 8, 1995: 86.

Redhead, Steve. *The End-of-the-Century Party,* Manchester: Manchester University, 1990.

Reinhardt, Robin and Christian Wright. "1st Annual Readers Poll." *SPIN.* October 1989: 83.

Reynolds, Simon. "Faves 2001."
<http://members.aol.com/blissout/faves2001.htm> (August 8, 2004).

Rimmer, David. *Like Punk Never Happened.* London: Faber and Faber, 1985.

Savage, Jon. "It's…An Original!." *The Rock Yearbook: 1983.* Ed. Al Clark. New York: St. Martin's, 1982. 120-3.

Shuker, Roy. *Understanding Popular Music*, New York: Routledge, 1994.

Straw, Will. "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music." *Cultural Studies.* 5.3 (1991): 368-88.

——-. "The Booth, The Floor and the Wall: Dance Music and the Fear of Falling." Will Straw, Stacey Johnson, Rebecca Sullivan and Paul Friedlander, eds. *Popular Music: Style and Identity.* Montreal: The Centre for Research on Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions/International Association for the Study of Popular Music. 249-254.

——-. "Value and velocity: the 12-inch single as medium and artifact." *Popular Music Studies.* David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus, eds. London: Arnold, 2002.

Tannenbaum, Rob. No title. *Village Voice.* March 5, 1991: 14.

Weinstein, Deena. *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology,* New York: Lexington, 1991.

Zanes, R.J. Warren. "Too Much Mead? Under The Influence (of Participant-Observation)." *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics.* Ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.

Discography

Aaliyah. "Are You That Somebody?" *I Care 4 You.* Blackground, 2002.

Abdul, Paula. "Straight Up." *Forever Your Girl.* Virgin, 1988.

B., Eric & Rakim. "Paid in Full (Seven Minutes of Madness Mix)." 4th & B'way, 1988.

Barbie Hit Mix. Kid Rhino, 2004.

Base, Rob and DJ E-Z Rock. "It Takes Two." Profile, 1988.

The Beatles. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.* Capitol, 1967.

———-. *The Beatles.* Capitol 1968.

Black Box. *Dreamland.* RCA/DeConstruction, 1990. All singles mentioned are on this disc.

Collins, Lyn. "Think (About It)." *James Brown's Original Funky Divas.* Polydor, 1998.

Cougar, John. *Nothin' Matters and What If It Did.* Riva, 1980.

Dylan, Bob. *John Wesley Harding.* Columbia, 1967.

Gaye, Marvin and Kim Weston. "It Takes Two." *Anthology.* Motown, 1980.

Holloway, Loleatta. "Love Sensation." Salsoul, 1980.

Jones, George. "He Stopped Loving Her Today." *Anniversary: Ten Years of Hits.* Epic, 1982.

LNR. "Work It to The Bone." *Best of House Music, Vol. 2: Gotta Have House.* Profile, 1993.

The Lovin' Spoonful. *Anthology.* Rhino, 1989.

Milli Vanilli. "Girl You Know It's True." *Girl You Know It's True.* Arista, 1989.

Morrison, Van. *Astral Weeks.* Warner Bros., 1968.

Nirvana. *Nevermind.* DGC, 1991.

Sequal. "Tell The Truth." Capitol, 1988.

The Sex Pistols. "Anarchy in the UK." *Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols.* Warner Bros., 1977.

S-Express. "Theme From S-Express." Capitol, 1988.

Silver Convention. "Get Up and Boogie (That's Right)." *The Disco Years, Vol. 6:*

Everybody Dance. Rhino Records, 1995.

The Soul Searchers. "Ashley's Roachclip." *Salt of the Earth.* Sussex, 1974.

Summer, Donna. "Bad Girls." *Bad Girls.* Casablanca, 1979.

Technotronic. "Get Up (Before The Night Is Over)." SBK, 1989.

Timberlake, Justin. *Justified.* Jive, 2002.

Touch. "Without You." Supertronics, 1978.

Watley, Jody. "Don't You Want Me." MCA, 1987.

The Who. "Baba O'Riley." *Who's Next.* Decca, 1971.

Wilson, Jackie. "Lonely Teardrops." *The Very Best of Jackie Wilson.* Rhino, 1995.