

‘THE UNDILUTED SQUASH OF UK MATH ROCK’ THE PERFORMER’S VIEW OF ARCTANGENT FESTIVAL

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Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork, this audio piece and accompanying essay examine the ways in which ArcTanGent Festival is perceived and experienced by performers within the largely underground UK math rock scene. The fieldwork took the form of a small-scale project at 2017's event, engaging three UK bands of differing levels of experience of the festival (which I label 'novice', 'intermediate' and 'veteran') to develop an understanding of their approaches to performance and how this impacts upon their development and standing within the scene. As heard in the interview extracts presented in the audio piece, the findings of the project expose similarities, but also some notable differences, in each subject's experience of ArcTanGent: for example, while it provides a valuable opportunity for a novice band, there is a sense of routine felt by veterans. Two important correlations are evident in their experiences. The first is the way in which ArcTanGent provides an 'unreal' experience in comparison with the everyday existence of each band, with one participant going so far as to suggest that it gives 'a slightly falsified sense of how popular you are

as a band when you come here' (Alpha Male Tea Party 2017a; audio 8.48). The second is a feeling that the festival has played a key role in establishing a community for scene participants from disparate parts of the UK. This essay outlines the contextual background to the study by considering definitions of math rock, the role of festivals in scenes, and notions of community within scene discourse. The audio piece provides a detailed discussion of the project's findings via the analysis of fieldwork interviews.



QR link to Audio Piece

Math Rock

Math rock is an under-researched style of popular music, which is emblematic of its niche status within popular culture as a whole; however, a handful of chapters approach it within scholarly discourse. Cateforis (2002) examines its relation to progressive rock from an aesthetic perspective, while Dale (2012) explores the DIY-punk context within which it largely exists. ArcTanGent itself has been explored by Forbes (2018) as an example of a small-scale music festival which sustains opportunities for performers as part of an 'alternative alternative' ecosystem. While math rock literature may be minimal, research to date highlights the range of existing debates to which studies such as this one can contribute. The aesthetic discourse of math rock provides scope for exploration in the context of genre studies, raising questions of authenticity and encouraging consideration of the influence of postmodernity and the internet upon its creation, dissemination and consumption. Furthermore, the UK math rock scene offers much in the realm of scene studies and exploration of industry practices, in line with texts on local scenes such as Cohen (1991) and Bennett (2000), and global/translocal (after Bennett and Peterson 2004) scenes such as Kahn-Harris (2006) and Bennett and Guerra eds. (2018).

Given math rock's lack of mainstream exposure, a brief overview of its aesthetics and culture is worthwhile (and readers may find the accompanying Spotify playlist (link in QR code) – 'An ArcTanGent mixtape' – a useful introduction to the sound of the current UK scene).[1] Since its establishment in the North American alternative rock landscape of the 1990s



'An ArcTangent mixtape'

(with links to the concurrent post-rock scene), the label 'math rock' has been used internationally to categorize guitar-based music which diverges from mainstream rock by utilising complex rhythmical structures and virtuosic instrumental performance in its apparent avoidance of commercial appeal (Cateforis 2002). It is rhythm which provides the core grounding of math rock's etymology: the frequent use of unusual time signatures, several of which may be used in a single song, leads to an unorthodox metric feel which differs greatly from the consistent duple, triple or quadruple time of most Anglo-American popular music. This is coupled with the use of extended instrumental techniques (guitar 'finger-tapping' is a key example), experimentation with digital effects (hardware which transforms timbres beyond expectations of electro-acoustic instruments) and, frequently, the absence of a vocalist – a choice which highlights the melodically and rhythmically disjunct instrumental material – to create music which is far removed from the usual expectations of rock performance.

It is also notable that math rock is considered separate from progressive, or prog, rock: the genre established in the late 1960s which alludes not only to the psychedelic rock style from which it sprang but also to elements of jazz, folk and classical music, and is similarly noted for its musical complexity and displays of instrumental virtuosity.

[1] The website Fecking Bahamas (<http://feckingbahamas.com/>) is a useful resource for exploring the translocal (after Bennett and Peterson, 2004) math rock scene. Alongside the usual reviews, interviews, features etc., there is an interactive map, several country-specific Bandcamp compilations and an essay series titled 'History of Math' which draws connections between US indie rock, prog and jazz.

The tastes of composers and consumers of math rock do not usually exclude prog rock; on the contrary, it is regularly cited as an influence. The differentiation between the two can be explained at least in part by math rock's debt to another antecedent: punk rock. Histories of popular music often portray 1970s punk as a rejection of the musical and theatrical extravagancies of progressive rock, opting instead for an approach which revelled in musical simplicity and sought to minimise the distance between performer and spectator (Laing 1985; Savage 2001). Punk is also credited with establishing DIY rock culture: while the most famous acts of the first wave of UK punk (Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Damned) were signed to major labels and therefore engaged with the established commercial intentions of the recording industry, what has come to be termed the post-punk era saw the creation of several independent record labels, sometimes run by performers themselves (Hesmondhalgh 1997; Reynolds 2006). While math rock cannot be said to appeal to punk in terms of musical simplicity, its relation to DIY culture provides a close link (Dale 2012). Math rock scenes around the world are sustained by a network of independent record labels and DIY concert promoters who largely treat their engagement as a labour of love, and the UK context is no exception. As a result, math rock has been viewed in popular discourse as a more 'authentic' style of progressive rock music, one which is concerned with artistic experimentation and exploration over conventions and commercialism (Echoes and Dust 2019).

This view is informed in part by the wide variety of music which is considered by audiences to be 'math rock,' as neatly illustrated by the sound of the three bands discussed in this study (and audible on the accompanying playlist). While Alpha Male Tea Party present carefully considered guitar and percussion timbres in their metrically shifting, riff-driven instrumental 'I Still Live at Home', Right Hand Left Hand's 'Seat 18c' owes more to the sound of krautrock in its four to the floor loop-based development. While these two instrumental examples demonstrate the frequent absence of



vocals, TTNG's 'Cat Fantastic' lays conjunct pure-toned vocal lines (whose socially minded lyrics, while of interest in the context of scene politics, will not be analysed here) over the shifting metre of busy guitar finger-picking and experimental drum patterns.

Quite which is the 'real' math rock is a debate commonly held among audiences, and the evidence presented here only serves to demonstrate that any claims for primacy should be critically scrutinised. Performers themselves can also shy away from the label: two of the bands interviewed for this project stated their belief that they were not math rock at all, while accepting that genre labelling is a process outside of their control (Alpha Male Tea Party 2017a; Right Hand Left Hand 2017a). This poses the question of whether math rock – as a collection of stylistically varied performers who are united only by their opposition to certain 'norms' of mainstream rock music – should be considered a genre or a scene. While the style of bands categorised as math rock varies widely, it is still considered by audiences as a genre: see, for example, the frequent use of the tag on the independent streaming/retail website Bandcamp and the ubiquitous 'List of math rock groups' entry on Wikipedia. For the purposes of this project math rock is considered a genre, though there is certainly scope for consideration of how this term is used in the postmodern, post-digital age. The key reason for these performers (or any, for that matter) being organised into a genre is economic; to allow for the ease of finding products to engage with financially (Frith 1996). Math rock is not peculiar in its sustained lack of investment: it is one of an unquantifiable number of popular music genres/scenes which exists despite its limited commercial potential. However, in the UK it has been given a significant boost in the last seven years by ArcTanGent, 'the UK's only festival dedicated to the very best music from the worlds of math-rock, post-rock and noise rock', which occurs annually on a farm south of Bristol (AIF 2019b).

ArcTanGent

The first ArcTanGent took place in 2013 as a spin-off from the longer-established 2000trees, a now 10,000 capacity festival which takes place in Gloucestershire and features a line-up largely comprising melodic rock bands. Robinson (2015: 69) discusses 2000trees in the context of ‘boutique festivals,’ arguing that it adopts a model which provides attendees with a celebratory space positioned outside of commercialised consumer culture. Unlike larger festivals, such as the comparable Reading/Leeds Festivals and the US-based Warped Tour (Dowd et al 2004), 2000trees is treated as an escape from mainstream culture. However, it is not entirely devoid of commercial interests: while big-name branding is not to be expected on the site, it prides itself upon an engagement with small-scale enterprise, particularly with regard to its provision of ‘locally handcrafted ales, lagers and ciders’ (AIF 2019a). However, it is also keen to point out that it is ‘all about the music’ (2000trees 2019). Two of 2000trees’ organisers, Simon Maltas and James Scarlett, joined forces with Goc O’Callaghan to establish ArcTanGent on the same boutique terms after identifying a strong thread of math and post rock bands enjoying popularity at the elder festival (Scarlett 2017). Interviewing Scarlett onsite in 2017 as approximately two thousand people assembled to watch the Physics House Band (‘a weird band’ by his own admission – judge for yourself via the accompanying playlist), he explained that while the organisers knew at the outset that they were taking a risk in catering to niche musical taste, he was ‘happy’ and ‘proud’ that it had taken off (Scarlett 2017). Most of ArcTanGent’s audience is UK-domiciled, but it also draws attendees from around the world (Alpha Male Tea Party 2017a; Forbes 2018). It has a committed and highly engaged audience and has come to assume congressional status among participants in the UK math rock scene, providing an opportunity for stakeholders to interact socially and strengthen networks (Forbes 2018). ArcTanGent is not peculiar in this regard: in their analysis of three examples which represent distinct scenes, Dowd et al conclude that music festivals ‘can both constitute scenes

and be embedded within existing scenes' (2004: 165). Given the disparate 'translocal' (Bennett and Peterson 2004) nature of the UK math rock scene, with small pockets spread across key urban centres of England and Scotland (Wales and Northern Ireland do not feature consistently on touring circuits), peer interactions are largely maintained via social media: for example, the Facebook group 'UK Math and Post-Rock' (which boasts over 6000 members to date) provides an online forum for the sharing of recordings and promotion of live events. My research demonstrates that in its short history ArcTanGent has become an important pillar in the structure of this underground scene, and has for some participants come to constitute the scene. Where the 'UK Math and Post-Rock' Facebook group allows for digital expressions of cultural belonging, building what Bennett and Peterson (2004) term a 'virtual scene,' ArcTanGent provides a rural space for the expression of collective identity and an opportunity for performers to engage with an audience who may provide them with further performance opportunities. This demonstrates how festivals provide a unique venue for performers as a site at which local, translocal and virtual scenes coalesce. ArcTanGent, as other scene-specific festivals, allows participants to 'enact the ways of life idealized within the scene' (Bennett and Peterson 2004: 10). In the case of the UK math rock scene, study of ArcTanGent uncovers that this coalescing has resulted in the formation of a nationwide community in which the mutual support offered by stakeholders has muted explicit expressions of competition.

Community-building

In labelling the demographic which attends and performs at ArcTanGent I use the terms 'scene' and 'community' as derived from Straw (1991) and developed by, among many others, Bennett and Peterson (2004). I entered the field to conduct the project with an understanding that there was a UK math rock 'scene,' in the sense that while there are few unifying musical aesthetics or traditions defining the work

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of participants in locations across the country (factors which Straw (1991: 469) considers to define a community), they are drawn together by common tastes and goals. However, my fieldwork interviews uncovered performers specifically identifying the UK network as a community in terms of creative, performative and social interactions. While the novice band perceived that they stood at the margins of a scene, they assumed that ArcTanGent had a sense of community in which participants shared an outlook on how to engage with and respond to the festival line-up (Right Hand Left Hand 2017a; audio piece 17.21). After performing at the festival and reaping the benefits of exposure to this community, they do not express a feeling of membership of it but rather acceptance into a 'musical circle', which I interpret to mean scene (Right Hand Left Hand 2018; audio piece 21.35).

The intermediate band are very clearly members of a UK math rock community and identify the network in such terms, recounting the ways in which it has sustained their creative endeavours. As such, they suggest that ArcTanGent is the most important gig in their calendar each time they play it (Alpha Male Tea Party 2017a; audio piece 8.38). The veteran band give some indication of notions of community, detailing their enjoyment in socialising with friends who have also performed at the festival (TTNG 2017b; audio piece 30.30), but do not explicitly express an identification with a scene and/or community, giving some indication that they have reached a level of fan support whereby neither one or the other is something which they have to rely upon to continue to write, record and perform their music. As such, they suggest that ArcTanGent has little to offer them in terms of creative and commercial development given that most festival attendees know what they sound like and have an opinion on them (TTNG 2017c).

Conclusion

This piece for *Riffs* has provided background information and a theoretical framework within which the results of the project, detailed and interpreted in the accompanying audio file, should be considered. The project demonstrates that ArcTanGent is viewed positively by each participant, but there are divergences in the way in which it impacts upon each band's development. Much of this has to do with their position within the scene and/or community, and as ArcTanGent approached its seventh iteration a debate broke out within the scene's blogosphere which provided an interesting lens through which to view the project. The audio piece details this and provides the overall conclusions to the submission (audio piece 37.20).

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Right Hand Left Hand. (2018) 31st August. Facebook video call.

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TTNG. (2017a) 18th August. Telephone.

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TTNG. (2017c) 15th October. Skype video call.

Music played in audio piece (in order of appearance)

Alpha Male Tea Party, 'Happy as Larry, Larry is Dead', *Droids* (2014)

Alpha Male Tea Party, 'You Eat Houmous, of Course You Listen to Genesis', *Droids* (2014)

Right Hand Left Hand, 'Seat 18c', *Right Hand Left Hand* (2016)

TTNG, 'Cat Fantastic', *13.0.0.0.0* (2013)

Alpha Male Tea Party, 'Athlete's Face', *Droids* (2014)

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