

## EDITORIAL

# AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON POPULAR MUSIC:

EXPLORING THE BLUES, JAZZ, GRIME, JOHN CAGE, LIVE PERFORMANCE, SOUNDCLOUD AND THE MASCULINITIES OF METAL

Shane Blackman and Robert McPherson

### Introduction: Autoethnography and Popular Music

This special edition of *Riffs* focuses on autoethnography and qualitative research in relation to popular music. The journal publication is twinned with a forthcoming book entitled: *Popular Music Ethnographies: practice, place, identity*. The intention of these studies is to uphold the principle that 'music is good to think with' (Chambers 1981: 38). *Riffs* was founded in 2015 to promote experimental writing on popular music, with a strong DiY ethos and space to offer flexibility and diversity of outputs through challenging interdisciplinary boundaries. At the same time there is a degree of similarity with specialist popular music magazines including *Mojo*, *fRoots* (1979-2019), *Rolling Stone*, *Record Collector*, *Prog*, *Mixmag*, and *Uncut*, through a focus on visuals and creative images. This suggests that there has been an increased growth at the 'popular' end of biographical and autoethnography within popular music. Critically, popular music autoethnographies work across and within disciplinary boundaries of anthropology, social anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and popular music studies.

In using the term autoethnography rather than auto biographical, our approach is based on an understanding developed by Liz Stanley (1993) and explored by Elizabeth Ettore (2017: 2) which puts an emphasis on the social and cultural dynamics impacting on people at a political level. It is this broader social context which Heewon Chang (2008: 146) sees as the analytical and interpretive basis to creative writing to show connectedness and develop critical theory. Further, in this collection the authors use a range of qualitative research methods which go beyond the first person and include observation, interviewing, and engaging with visual and audio material. The critical framework for the authors' 'stories' operates as a self-reflective form of writing



concerned with events, thoughts, feelings, adventures, and experiences that give priority to the researcher's subjectivity. Karen Lumsden (2019: 70) sees autoethnography as an autobiographical genre of writing where we as researchers cannot be divorced from 'our own background' and experience. The aim here is that the papers offer multiple layers of meaning and insight on popular music as they move from the personal to the cultural (Bartleet 2009). Autoethnographers are fully engaged in a complex act of writing, thinking, and feeling as they integrate themselves and the narrative they are producing into a wider picture. It is a collaboration with the self which is naturalistic and seeks affirmation in wider cultural understandings. In one sense it is a style of realism, but the departure is through the imagination. In one sense it is a style of realism, but the departure is through the imagination, and at the same time the story, of necessity, requires plausibility, autoethnography is not confessional in the sense of a 'kiss and tell all story': it is an analytical, reflective, and cultural interpretation.

As a research method, autoethnography gives voice to personal experiences and feelings through the writing of biographical stories. At the same time, Brent Luvaas (2017: 260) warns us against the invasive practical risk of autoethnography on the researcher's "state of mind." This is captured well by Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2017: 7), who note that where autoethnographers write on the 'auto' – the personal part of their experience – this might be seen as narcissistic or open the researcher to danger, whereas if the autoethnographer remains at the level of the 'ethno' their experience is integrated into a wider cultural understanding. Carolyn Ellis (1991) contends that there is considerable opposition to the development of the emotional side of social research. For Hochschild (1975) this relates to the masculine domination of research, we affirm her stance that subjectivity and emotion could only enter the discipline from outside the mainstream through ethnographic and feminist work (Blackman 2007). For us, autoethnography powerfully employs the imagination of interpretation on a theoretical platform which seeks creative insights informed by voices, practice, and collaboration. Qualitative methods collect data where feeling and emotion also guide the writing through the researcher's knowledge and experience via the mechanism of a narrative. This makes autoethnography personal through its focus on self-explored stories on music.

These ideas of how the personal relates to the larger historical scene were first explored by C.W. Mills' (1959: 14) *The Sociological Imagination*, where he urged us to examine individual biographies and histories within the social structure, to focus on our 'self-consciousness.' At the same time the personal also becomes the social because when conducting research through creative writing, the author is focusing on experience and identity within a theoretical and critical context. Carolyn, Adams and Bochner (2010) suggest that autoethnographies should be written in a compelling way so that readers are affected.

In this sense, the art of writing to tell a story should permit both the reader and the author to experience the similar emotions (Park 1940: xiv-xv). For Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis' (2012), autoethnographies on music centre on the methodological side of telling personal stories through music. It is a method through which musicians might feel freer to explore themselves via what they call embodiment. The link is that music and autoethnography is about creative opportunities of expression and emotion, in that they explore the art of listening as a human skill for true sensitivity. An advantage the autoethnographer brings is that they are articulating the story from the inside: they have invited the reader into the author's own world of taste and trust which hinges upon dual recognition of respect and authenticity. Qualitative and autoethnographic research are ways to write about culture from a personal and holistic basis informed by patterns, values, and rituals of the everyday. All ethnographic studies involve degrees of participation or co-production. It is the nature of fieldwork to generate intimacy and exchange. Although there are different approaches towards autoethnographies of popular music, here the determining influence

is through fieldwork, based on observation, participation, and reflection on the cultures under study.

## The Issue

This guest-edited issue of *Riffs* offers a critical and analytical engagement on popular music where researchers employ their research imagination to interpret the personal, political, and social context of music within a range of settings and genres. In this collection, we are interested in descriptions of music and cultures and importantly how work is written and what it seeks to argue through qualitative methods and autoethnography.

In these chapters, Stuart Slater introduces us to how John Cage – and his eponymous silent piece *4'33"* – influenced his own practice and creativity as a music educator, music consultant, and performer. Chloe Fenech takes us inside the Blues vocals of Julie Driscoll and how Chloe's own voice, tone and vocal delivery as a singer and performer recognises the inflections of Driscoll's own performance of the Blues in a male-dominated vocal genre. Joy White and Johnny Ilan journey us into their reflections of the UK rap and grime scene, exposing their own individual identities and how these impacted upon their interpretation of individual creative outputs of songs and videos in the genre that are rich in ethnographic detail. Marina Arias and Pablo Espiga introduce SoundCloud as a fruitful, creative space, where musicians locate often raw, unfinished, and experimental work away from the glare of commercial success; recognising that audiences and users consistently change practices in the rapidly changing digital world. David Cashman, Waldo Garrido and Tim Kelly consider the role of spectacle in the creation of successful live performances, arguing that musical technique alone is not enough for success in the contemporary music industry where a combination of skill and spectacle are now the driving force of audience participation and engagement. Robert Smith provides us with a fascinating insight into musical utopias, focused on community projects he participated in which saw both unknown and renowned artists performing on the same bill on an equal status and footing. He argues that these utopias should be recognised when they are there, as they can disappear as quickly as they arrive and can never quite be replicated in their ethos. Finally, Karl Spracklen examines the heavy metal scene in the north of England, considering social class, gender, and ethnicity as markers of identity within the genre, before locating a shift in social and cultural diversity within audiences based upon his own observations of the scene at live concerts within the region.

**Shane Blackman** is a Professor of Cultural Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. His books include *Youth: Positions and Oppositions, Style, Sexuality and Schooling* (1995); *Drugs Education and the National Curriculum* (1996); *Chilling Out: The Cultural Politics of Substance Consumption, Youth and Drug Policy* (2004); and *Young People, Class and Place*, edited with Tracy Shildrick and Robert MacDonald (2010). He has recently published papers on ethnography, subcultural theory, anti-social behaviour, and alcohol and young women. He is an editor of the *Journal of Youth Studies* and *YOUNG: Nordic Journal of Youth Research* and a member of the *ESRC Peer Review College*.

Shane says: I have been collecting records since I was at primary school, where I also used to read the *NME* and *The Melody Maker*. When I was 13, I went with friends to see rock groups in Folkestone and London; I saw Thin Lizzy three times before I was 14 and Joan Armatrading at Hammersmith Odeon when I was 15. At the same time, I was introduced to playing guitar riffs, but after initial success fine art took over! As an undergraduate I saw many popular music concerts, but few had

an impact of seeing Weather Report at the Rainbow Theatre, six rows from the front with Wayne Shorter and Jaco Pastorius; you were literally blown away. The following week it was Kraftwerk at the Hammersmith Odeon: no instrument on stage. Everyone suffered a culture shock! But it was enjoyable. After gaining my degree, I got employment working at *Our Price Records* in London. After a year within popular music retail, I left to take up an ESRC scholarship to do a PhD in Sociology at the Institute of Education, University of London. I was supervised by Professor Basil Bernstein and Phil Cohen. This was the beginning of my academic career in ethnographies of youth culture: their guidance was inspiring.

**Rob McPherson** is a Senior Lecturer in Media & Communications at Canterbury Christ Church University. He is published in the field of youth studies, alcohol studies, sociology, and ethnography with a specific focus on young people, intoxication, and autobiographical research. Rob's research interests also include urban studies as well as popular music and popular culture. He is a peer reviewer of the *Journal of Youth Studies* and *YOUNG: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*.

Rob says: Growing up, music was always important to me, and I was introduced to the rhythm of Motown and unity of The Beatles during drives in the car with my parents, besides much more at an early age. These experiences formed my interest in music, but it was the electronic punk/dance crossover of The Prodigy that awoke my teenage self to music which – I felt – belonged to me. Or rather, I belonged to it, along with many other young people growing into teenage years in the early to mid-1990s. This sense of identity led me into the world of dance music and to late nights and early mornings drenched in sound, surrounded by friends and strangers in the legal and illegal rave scenes, before moving into the festival scene of the late-1990s and early-2000s. I feel privileged to have enjoyed my youth at a time which can be defined by the way musical diversity was embraced by audiences; straight from the concert into the rave (and sometimes back again!). This formative and affirming experience became my escape from the ritual of everyday life, and then became the subject of my undergraduate work in Media & Cultural Studies where I was able to focus on the commercialisation of the UK dance music scene post the 1994 Criminal Justice Act. This then led me into undertaking my ethnographic PhD research on young people and alcohol consumption within city-centre spaces. To me music represents youth, freedom, talent, community, live performance. All these thrilling elements of the musical experience – whether as creator or consumer – are represented in the diversity this issue presents for you and more. Shane and I hope that you enjoy reading these contributions as much as we have enjoyed collaborating with the authors in this exciting issue of *Riffs*.

### *Acknowledgements*

We would like to offer special thanks to Sarah Raine, also Craig Hamilton, Debbie Cox, and the reviewers of the articles.

### References

- Bartleet, B-L. (2009) Behind the Baton: Exploring Autoethnographic Writing in a Musical Context, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38(6), DOI:10.1177/0891241609341638: 713-733.
- Bartleet, B-L. and Carolyn Ellis, C. (2012) *Music Autoethnographies: making autoethnography sing / making music personal*. Australian Academic Press.

- Blackman, S. (2007) 'Hidden Ethnography': crossing emotional borders in qualitative accounts of young people's lives, *Sociology*, Vol.41, No. 4: 699-716.
- Chang, H. (2008) *Auto ethnography as Method*. California: Left Coast Press.
- Chambers, I. (1981) Popular Music: a teaching perspective. *Screen Education*, 39, Summer: 35-46.
- Ellis, C, Adams, T. & Bochner, A. (2010) Autoethnography: An Overview. *Journal Historical Social Research*, 12: 273-290.
- Ellis, C. (1991). Emotional sociology. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 12: 123-145.
- Ettorre, E. (2017) *Autoethnography as Feminist Method*. London: Routledge.
- Hochschild, A. (1975) The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion: selected possibilities, in Rosenberg, M. and Turner, R. (eds) *Social Psychology: sociological perspectives*, New York. Basic Books: 562-592.
- Lumsden, K. (2019) *Reflexivity: theory, method, and practice*. London: Routledge.
- Luvaas B. (2019) Unbecoming The aftereffects of autoethnography. *Ethnography*. 20. 2: 245-262. doi:[10.1177/1466138117742674](https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138117742674)
- Mills, C. W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Park, R. (1940) Introduction, to MacGill Hughes, H. *News and the Human Interest Story*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press: xi-xxiii.
- Stanley, L. (1993) On Auto/Biography in Sociology, *Sociology*, 27.1: 41-52.

