

# Unsounded

## the Decline and Fall of Music

### David Thompson

"We belong to an age in which culture is being destroyed by the means of culture."

Nietzsche, 1878

If the music and related media consumed by the young and curious are, to some extent, barometers of our anxious age, any recent gauging might lend Nietzsche's words an unwelcome resonance. Those of us whose interest in new musical forms extends beyond the Ten Commandments of the market niche may have detected a steep downward spiral in both of the above. At a time when music intrudes in so many private and public spaces, from shopping malls and music-on-hold to the routine assaults of overdriven car systems, the levels of popular attention and public expectation seem lower and more regulated than ever before.

A cursory scan of the numerous magazines ostensibly enthralled by musical possibilities actually reveals a striking uniformity of both presentation and content. Rare displays of critical acuity, if indeed they can be found, seem strangely disconnected from the cognitive poverty of their printed surroundings. Amidst the numerical reviews announcing marks out of ten, any glimpse of more considered articulation seems arch and incongruous, as if it were the improbable result of some typographical glitch. Much of the music media no longer appears willing to explore its subject in terms of shape, suggestion and intention. Accordingly, the personal experience of music is almost entirely overshadowed by a fixation with the collective leisure activities of clubbing, chemicals and rock concerts. A journalistic preoccupation with convenient appearances seems in unwelcome ascendance, sitting all too neatly with a wider contemporary reduction of culture to a mere entertainment commodity, something to be *consumed*.

Perhaps the most dazzling marriage of cult and consumerism is the phenomenon referred to as 'club culture'. Few could have anticipated the rise to prominence of an inter-continental youth movement whose tribal figureheads are acclaimed for an ability to momentarily synchronise two turntables. The heated and uniquely functional listening context of the dance-floor not only simplifies the range of musical criteria, with its obvious emphasis on the linear and ballistic, but also offers its initiates a heavily accessorised and uniform relationship with the music they embrace. The narrow musical menu of the club experience can easily become reified in the rituals of powders, pills and other chemical paraphernalia, effectively relegating even the most geological low frequencies to a convenient pretext for the more fascinating business of social preening, sartorial status and sexual manoeuvres.

The default format of magazines orbiting 'club culture' is perhaps the most obvious evidence of declining expectations in the producers, consumers and

critics of music. Paradoxically, the exhaustive array of titles fighting for shelf-space and shrinking attention spans offers the reader no significant choice at all. Largely interchangeable, each brightly-coloured collage of sound-bites, self-reference and fashion spreads provides few qualitative reasons for choosing one rather than another. Despite the bold protestations of 'underground' status, the youth culture being advertised has much in common with the bizarre homogeneity and anaesthetic toy-town aesthetic of the shopping mall. (It is, incidentally, hard to avoid the suspicion that almost every major chain-store now promotes some form of 'loyalty card' precisely because there is no longer a reason to feel loyalty toward any such organisation.)

The content of most popular music magazines rarely addresses music directly at all and seems determined to steer the reader toward purely visual concerns. Coincidentally, the arrival of MTV and the music video could be said to have reduced music to a limited menu of sneering postures and adolescent *anomie*, with the performer as the exclusive and inevitable object of attention. Consequently, a neurotic and fiercely territorial approach to music is fostered, with any small criticism of the artist's work being felt as a barbed personal assault by the fan. As the listener is encouraged to personally identify with the *figure* and not the work itself, any serious discussion of the artist's material becomes impossible. Both parties share a tacit conception of music as an incidental accessory; an arbitrary vehicle to attaining the purported nirvana of status and celebrity. In these televisual terms, gimmicks, gestures and sexual fetishism are the true preoccupations of an audience hypnotised by the relentless and banal imagery of youth culture.

A creed of coarsening expediency and cultural utilitarianism runs unquestioned throughout mainstream music publishing, an ever-decreasing frame of reference resulting in a myopic constriction of ideas and debate. The notion of music without a prefix is anathema to a generation of writers and retailers who discuss music entirely in terms of endless, and often ludicrous, classifications. The demanding and untidy ideals of journalistic depth, detail and factual accuracy no longer seem necessary. Irrespective of their interests and intentions, artists and labels are obliged to fit comfortably within the narrowing parameters of a glib and frequently cynical media formulation. The testing of artistic substance and probing of ideas appear to be in retreat, systematically replaced by sweeping resumption and simplistic prejudice. Indeed, the word itself seems increasingly squeezed into the inconvenient gaps left by advertising and images.

As the proliferation of titles compete for an audi-

ence of jaded palette and finite size, publishers have become ever more dependent on advertising revenue to sustain their efforts. This unannounced shift of emphasis from the reader to the corporate sponsor inevitably jeopardises editorial autonomy. Few editors can afford to be openly critical of the handiwork of companies whose promotional budget keeps their own boat afloat. Writers previously known for a measure of intelligence and forthright independence find themselves having to adjust to a prevailing climate of cautious expediency and manic infantilism. If a piece of writing does not directly endorse or promote a particular product, the chances are it will be met with a degree of editorial discomfort or quietly be excluded on the grounds it doesn't 'fit' the magazine's 'style' or 'readership profile'. The cost of this uneasy compromise, and its broader implications, are not difficult to fathom.

If the printed music media is often fearful of deviating from the predictions of market research by talking 'above the heads' of its readers, it is evidently all too happy to talk down to them and insult their intelligence as a matter of course. In his recent book *The Aesthetics Of Music*, Roger Scruton points out: "Muzak induces relaxation precisely in those who do not notice it. To the musical, who cannot avoid noticing such things, muzak is exquisite torture." Similarly, those who take the greatest pleasure from the experience of music are the first to suffer from the lowering of aspiration and endeavour. Conversely, those in whom the interest in music is superficial and transitory now dominate the media agenda and command its overwhelming attention. The arts coverage of the British broadsheet newspapers routinely favours barely grammatical rock concert coverage over a spectrum of more substantial and demanding musical forms. The Spice Girls were exhaustively covered by each of the British 'quality' papers, all eager to billboard 'five low-forehead whores and their male marketing pimp', albeit with varying degrees of irony and post-modern *ennui*. For six months and more, the shadow of the incapable seemed almost inescapable.

Attempts to articulate either the wider considerations of an artist's work, or indeed the detailed specifics of such work, require more than a glib identikit summary. The seriousness and commitment that an artist may feel toward their own compositions, or to creativity in broader terms, sits uncomfortably in a context of reflexive cynicism. Truly innovative work, perhaps by definition, defies easy classification and predetermined marketing niches. Of course, obviousness and immediacy may be the aims and aspirations of *neither* artist nor listener, and some measure of effort and attention may be required before the work

# Practice:

## Journalism

unfolds its secrets.

As the scale, expense and complexity of the music industry have increased by orders of magnitude, cynical assumptions and failures of imagination have hardened into habit, coinciding with the emergence of an orthodox commercial blueprint. The sheer cost of launching a new artist into the popular arena now dictates a shifting of priority away from exploratory innocence and artistic autonomy toward a more self-conscious calculation. The ascendancy of market research and the near-ubiquity of focus groups define a climate of trepidation and second-guessing audience appetites based purely on what has gone before. Artistic decisions are thereby ultimately surrendered to the audience, a manoeuvre that confines creativity to its own history and presumes art and show-business as entirely indistinguishable concerns. The role of the contemporary A&R manager can, and often does, serve to undermine the artist, diminishing their participation to that of a convenient brand name or face.

Few A&R managers appear to entertain the possibility that the listener might listen precisely because they don't know what possibilities exist, and the musician's value is precisely as an expert and guide through unfamiliar terrain. The idea that music might be written independently of audience expectation and still prove to be enormously popular has been largely abandoned, replaced by music that is specifically *designed* to be popular. The principles of this careful engineering are far from esoteric: *Ask nothing. Give nothing. Offend no-one.* We are evidently expected to accept a new down-sized definition of artistic endeavour, defined purely in functional terms of tactical calculation and rudimentary problem solving. Dissent from this terminal orthodoxy is commonly viewed as a Copernican heresy and the heretic is likely to be labelled as elitist, quixotic or simply deranged. The poignant and ineffable connection that music can make possible, often without warning or invitation, is, however, an intangible quality and is therefore enormously difficult to quantify or formulate. The value of music as meaningful and important is now all too easily excluded from the very process it has made possible.

The vast media array of *laissez faire* capitalism seems absorbed by this new economic fundamentalism, fixated by surfaces, untroubled by the poverty of intimacy and substance, and indifferent to the consequences that seem likely to follow. One of the prominent features of this economic ideology is a tendency toward a pantomime of dubious egalitarianism. Curiously, the more overtly commercial the publication, the more aggressively this selective view of democracy holds sway. Significantly, the advertised

democracy is expressed as an inflexible and unquestioned devotion to feeding appetites of the lowest common denominator. The over-riding tenet of faith being: *"Aim low, sell cheap"*. Any acknowledgement of the role of a diverse and well-informed debate as a vital component of democracy is conspicuously difficult to detect.

Perhaps this is merely a symptom of some wider malaise. The immediate advantage of capitalism over the ideologies it has largely replaced has been the diversification and choice it can facilitate. Perversely, the current economic climate, which amounts to a predatory struggle for distribution space and market share, shows alarming signs of reversing this trend toward diversity in many areas of cultural life. As corporate assimilations increase and global oligarchies form, the gravitational effects of capital have become pronounced and unavoidable. Money attracts money, and the bigger the available budget, the more of other people's money tends to accrete. In the industries of music, film, television and literature, an increasing proportion of financial and promotional resource is being diverted to a handful of seasonal do-or-die blockbusters, whether in the form of albums, movies or popular novels. The television programme *"Seinfeld"* apparently amounted to no less than 40% of the NBC network's profits for 1997. The success of this strategy depends heavily on the occupation of all possible space within the media and distribution systems. The underlying aim is simply to obscure and exclude any evidence of alternatives. If the latest remake of *"Godzilla"* is shown across two or three screens in every major American multiplex, the movie may do very well indeed, but the freedom to choose one's viewing is clearly, and deliberately, being limited.

In a recent ECM catalogue, Manfred Eicher, director of the acclaimed Munich label, asked *"How can serious music get a hearing in the absence of any substantial critical debate?"* The ongoing shrivelling of journalistic expectation threatens not only the future of musical diversity and the risk-taking inherent to innovation, but also calls into question the honesty of

any residual discourse that may survive. If the creation, criticism and circulation of music is ultimately to be shaved down to a series of swift financial transactions and nothing more, can the printed opinions of any writer be taken at face value? With fewer spaces allowed for reflective pauses and open-ended questioning, will the music journalist be expected to function primarily as a partisan lobbyist, another extension of the PR machine? Will the potential for a boot-straping symbiosis between artist and critic—in which a mutual honesty is essential to any development of the work in question—become entirely theoretical?

