

Yet Another Reason to Hate Oasis **Circulation and Branding in the UK Music Press**

The beginning of the new millennium has proven to be a turbulent time for the traditional British rock music press. The closure of *Melody Maker*, which Frith (1983) calls the oldest magazine of its kind (166), was followed closely by the closure of *Select*, a monthly title that had concentrated on what has come to be known as the 'indie' market since its inception in 1990. As recently as July of 2001, *Kingsize*, a magazine launched in March of the same year, was shelved permanently. So what is going wrong in the UK?

This paper takes as its premise that the problems being faced by the music press in the UK results from the loss of a niche audience that can be understood as having evolved around the genre of alternative or 'indie' music. To some extent, this audience can be understood as a subculture that developed in the wake of punk, and one that became more visible and apparent with movements such as shoegazing, baggy (or the Manchester movement), and grunge. Like most subcultures, this audience was noticeable for their favoured music, their clothing, their politics, and their anti-mainstream stance. Additionally, as Thornton (1995) has argued, these types of niche audiences/subcultures rely on specialised media to recognise who they are and in this instance that role was performed by *Melody Maker*, the *NME*, and *Select* magazine. This paper argues that it is the loss of this niche audience that has affected the function of these titles and resulted in the uncertain state of the contemporary UK music press.

In undertaking research for this project I had the opportunity to interview editors and journalists from magazines such as the *NME*, *Melody Maker*, *Select*, *Q*, *Mojo*, *Uncut* and *Kerrang!*. Nearly all interviewees agreed that people's investment in music had changed in recent times and a number of reasons were offered to explain this. Whilst all agreed that the subcultures that have evolved around genres such as heavy metal and dance music still exist, the interviewees working for the rock/alternative/indie press seemed inclined to agree that the niche groupings that once were attracted to their titles had all but disappeared. Former editor of *Select* and senior writer for *Q* magazine, John Harris, suggests the most obvious reason for this is the loss of what he terms 'outsider culture'. He argues that during the Thatcher years;

“The idea was, once you got a job you were dead - the adult world wasn't a glamorous place. Since then the adult world has become a glamorous place, the corporate world has reinvented itself – you know you have a palm pilot and you fly around the world – even though most people have still got shit jobs that is the illusion. This economic boom has been going on for 10 years so young people are a lot more of an inclusive bunch than they used to be – they don't have the need for badges of difference and that notion of rejecting the other world doesn't really exist any more.” (Harris, 2001)

Harris' quote points to a particularly poignant problem within the world of alternative/indie rock music. Throughout the Sixties and into the Seventies, this type of music, although it was named differently, was seen in opposition to the mainstream market of popular music. This understanding seemed to resurface even stronger following the advent of punk and subsequent subculture theory that concentrated on notions of resistance apparent in music and style choices. Yet recent work on subculture theory is revealing (see Gelder and Thornton, 1997) as it concentrates more on leisure and style choices as a means of identification rather than using these signifiers as examples of resistance to parent or dominant culture. Examining the role

of the music press and uses of music in the UK in the 1990s demonstrate why outsider culture, and notions of resistance central to it, can no longer be fully articulated.

Throughout the 1980s, music papers like *NME* and the *Melody Maker* struggled to make sense of “new pop” (Reynolds, 1990), represented by acts such as Culture Club, Kim Wilde, and Duran Duran, that was dominating the UK music landscape. Jason Toynbee (1993) in charting early changes within the UK music press, argues that with the arrival of *Smash Hits*, who instigated the appropriate discourse and light hearted tone to discuss this genre, the inkies returned to their traditional territory of rock and championing the marginal. In doing so, titles such as these became a must read for those interested in music outside of the charts and as such they were able to construct a niche audience and a sense of community through the selection of marginal artists and musicians they covered. This was to continue into the early nineties where the bands championed by *NME*, *Melody Maker* and magazines such as *Vox* and *Select* were only ever moderately successful. Bands like Jesus and Mary Chain, the Happy Mondays and the House of Love were hailed as heroes if they were lucky enough to crash the lower end of the Top 40 singles or album charts. This is certainly no longer the case.

When asked what they thought was the major contributing factor in the changed fortunes of the UK music press, an overwhelming majority of my interviewees cited the movement that has come to be known as Britpop. Represented by the likes of Blur, Pulp, Oasis, Elastica and Supergrass, Britpop was initially understood as somewhat of a triumph. As many of the respondents noted suddenly “our bands” were everywhere and no doubt this triumphant spirit was shared too by the community of

readers as a sort of confirmation that their tastes in music were not simply a folly. But this notion of ownership shared by the writers and the readers of the music press was soon to disperse as Britpop acts became regulars on national media channels such as *Radio One*, music television shows like *Top of the Pops* and were featured across the full spectrum of newspapers and magazines in the UK. As Thornton (1995) has argued in her study of club cultures,

“...disapproving ‘moral panic’ stories in mass circulation tabloid newspapers often have the effect of certifying transgression and legitimizing youth cultures....Approving reports in mass media like tabloids or television...are the subcultural kiss of death.” (6)

In this equation the Britpop movement can be understood to have began the process of legitimising a genre of music that had up until now been a form of subcultural capital. As such, the idea of a community bound by marginality was disappearing fast as the content that was once traditionally the preserve of the music press became more dispersed and popularised.

Perhaps the most explicit example of this was what has come to be known as the ‘Blur versus Oasis thing’. Long antagonistic to each other, the bands release new singles from forthcoming albums on the same day at the height of the Britpop phenomenon. The extent of the coverage could not have been predicted with every major newspaper covering the story as well as all the major news programs on terrestrial television. This type of coverage ushered in a new era of music reporting, one which has increased considerably since this time and demonstrates there is no reason to wait a week or a month for the next issue of a music magazine when you can read the reviews, news and features of a broadsheet or tabloid. The culture represented by this genre of music had been absorbed into dominant (media) culture, a shift similar to Hebdige’s (1979) theory of “ideological recuperation” (97) whereby the sense of

being outside culture is slowly eradicated by absorption into dominant structures. “Our bands” as represented by Britpop had become mainstream, the death of any subcultural construction, and a huge problem for a media that relied on this construction for its address.

In his exploration of the functions of the music press, Shuker (1994) notes how their role is often one of “gatekeepers of taste, arbiters of cultural history” (92) whereby championing a band through a review or a feature story for example may influence, rather than reflect, the consuming choices of their readerships. But as Alexis Petridis (2001), former editor of *Select* and rock critic with the *Guardian*, points out this was to come under scrutiny with the band Oasis. Championed by the music press upon the release of their first album, their second album was met with very mediocre reviews. As Petridis says, this record went on to be “this huge kind of Zeitgeist defining record [and] the music press were baffled”, wondering why people were no longer listening to them. The split between public opinion and critical discourse was only to be made more obvious when Oasis released their third album *Be Here Now*. Releasing that they got it wrong the last time, Petridis’ feels that the press allowed them to be swayed by public opinion and gave the album glowing reviews. But the move backfired – whilst *Be Here Now* sold an enormous amount in its first few weeks of its release, it now has the prestige of being the most returned CD in British history and the one album that to this day still attracts chords of derision from the music press.

The split between public opinion and the music press demonstrated perhaps that nobody really cared what the music press said any more. As several interviewees explained the situation worsened as ‘xeroxed versions’ of Britpop bands began to

emerge. Aesthetic judgements aside, bands like Kula Shaker, Sleeper, Menswear and Gay Dad never reached the heights of their forefathers despite decent coverage in the music press. It was becoming obvious nobody was really listening, or perhaps only a much smaller number. A situation that seems to still be prevalent today, as Petridis points out – “One of the biggest bands in the UK now is Stereophonics and they have never had anything but average reviews in the UK music press” (2001).

After the brief hurrah that was Britpop the circulation of the music press would never reach the same heights as those achieved during this movement. Whilst it is easy to surmise that the closure of two magazines was simply the end result of this downturn, Forde’s (2001) contemporary study of the UK music press offers a more considered account. He argues that the present map of the music press in that country is a result of an overcrowding of the market that has resulted in readers becoming “increasingly ‘promiscuous’ [as they] ‘grazed’ across the available titles with no sense of affiliation to a single title” (29). This change in consumption has led the organisations responsible for the publication of these titles to reconsider the how best to attract readers. With the loss of a musical subculture informed by a sense of outsider culture, it would seem the answer has been found in the concept of branding – a concept that says more about the personality of the title, than it does about the content. EMAP (*Q*, *Mojo*, *Mixmag*, *Smash Hits*, *Kerrang!*) and IPC (*NME*, *Uncut*, *Muzik*) have both adapted branding strategies for their music titles (see, ‘On the Brand Wagon’) in an attempt to overcome the problems associated with the traditional role of the music press. Here, the aim is to generate for a given title “an appeal over and above what can be explained by the functional benefits it offers” (Knowles, 2001: 21). With this in mind, branding not only provides the means by which to differentiate in an

overcrowded market (Forde), but also the means by which to re-imagine the benefits of the product itself. With the music press finding it more difficult to address readers based on marginal music genres, it would seem interpellation is now structured around the perceived personality of the title itself.

The move to branding has resulted in internal restructuring taking place within the publishing groups themselves, whereby there has been a shift in focus from mediums to markets. Music titles are no longer imagined as magazines in their own right, rather as brands that afford the opportunity to be extended into other mediums. For example, *Kerrang!*, *NME*, *Q*, and *Smash Hits* all now have their own Internet sites, digital radio stations, award ceremonies and in the case of *Q* their own cable television network. Yet whether these moves are in fact assisting the magazines in the prime objective of having an identifiable niche audience is debatable to those who write for the publications. For while a magazine like *Kerrang!* that specialises in heavy metal/rock, and dance magazines like *Muzak* and *Mixmag* continue to increase their circulation largely through having identifiable audiences, titles like *Q* and *NME* continue to grow broader in their approach. Differences between competing titles may in fact be more difficult ascertain as the music press becomes more customised, rather than specialised, in their attempt to attract greater readerships.

The shift to a broader address seems to have been made necessary by moves into radio, television and the new media as these are mediums that unlike magazines, rely on attracting a mass audience. *NME*, for instance, which was once stoutly anti-mainstream now appears to be more forgiving in its selection of genres. It's search for a new audience has been reflected in the covers of the past two years which have

featured R&B artists like Aaliyah, Missy Elliott, and So Solid Crew, indie acts like The White Stripes and The Strokes, as well as covering Top 40 acts like Destiny's Child, Gorillaz and UK *Popstars* winners Hear'Say. The inclusive nature of the content covered in the *NME* may eventually be awarded with higher circulation figures but for now it would seem the broadening of content is having a detrimental effect of what the title has become known for. Lynskey (2001) for example, argues the *NME* "give the appearance of being opinionated but their musical base is so broad that it is meaningless". If Lynskey is correct, the impact of branding on the *NME* is indicative of the problem implicit with applying marketing theory for tangible goods to those that are intangible. Discourse is what the *NME* has traditionally been famous for, and in its attempt to locate new readers it may well be this aspect of its personality that is being compromised.

Whilst *Q* has always been known for its customised selection of musical artists, it would seem that the extending the personality of this title into other mediums is presenting a slightly different problem. For example, several members of the UK music press suggested that *QTV* in no ways reflects the audience of the magazine, a situation made clear each month when a listing of the top twenty video requests are reported in the magazine. As a *Q* journalist commented,

"it's all Limp Bizkit and Blink 182 and this is a real problem. What is basically says to any reader that is paying attention is that *QTV* seems to be for 16 year-old metal fans which is nothing to do with *Q* magazine. I think *QTV* is a really good example of bad brand extensions. It's not branding, it's creating something and then sticking the name on it." (Anon, 2001)

Whilst readers of *Q* magazine would probably read a story about Limp Bizkit, they would be highly unlikely to request their song on a cable network – if fact, given *Q*'s demographics, it would be unlikely that they would be the type of person requesting

anything via a cable request program. It would appear that *QTV*'s strategy is to aim for a much broader audience than is characteristic of the printed title. As Harris (2001) suggests, in order to reflect the magazine and its readers, *QTV* would be funding and producing documentaries about musicians and artists rather than simply playing video clips. With the costs involved for this type of production, and given that *QTV* is only one of the extensions for the brand, this seems an unlikely prospect. Rather, like the changes apparent at the *NME* the reconfigurations that have resulted from attempting to attract new audiences seems to be confusing the personality of the title on which the prospect of branding relies on so explicitly.

The interviewees contacted for this project agree that brands can only be extended if the brand itself (the magazine) is a solid and identifiable product. In the past, these identifiable products, like all magazines, concentrated their address on niche audiences. With the disappearance of traditional niche readerships and attempts to attract a broader audience through extensions into other media, it would certainly seem that printed titles in the UK music media are gradually becoming less individualistic and possibly less identifiable. Whether they can in fact make the transition from a niche media to one that addresses a broader audience will become more apparent as the uptake of new media forms becomes more consolidated. This factor, alongside market conditions will continue to impact on the fortunes of the music press as much as they have done in the past. Finally, as the relationship between the Britpop movement and the fortunes of the music press has shown, the changing uses and consumption patterns of popular music are central in this publishing conundrum. Indeed given the comments of the music journalists cited above, the present state of the music press in the UK could be attributed to one band

and the bombastic promises offered by them, and it is for this that we find (or maybe it is just me) yet another reason to hate Oasis.

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List of Interviewees (quoted in text)

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