

Fear of the Dark

Punks vs Indie kids - Who's really scared of what lurks close-by?

My previous attempt to write around the attitudes and behaviours typical of the underground music snob began with a distancing admission about my love of Soundgarden. I'd like this article to be no different - all the bands I hero-worshipped as a small town bourgeois Kerrang reader tended to be American longhairs.

Interestingly enough my earliest tape purchases, ignorant of any music press, were mainly UK based bands – Queen, Def Lep, Eric Clapton, Led Zep, Status Quo etc. But these mum, dad and 'cool uncle'-inspired English dinosaurs were quickly usurped by a purebred horde of USA greasy superstars, keen to nip in the bud any sign of Brit reserve present in my blossoming CD collection. If it weren't for stinking Brazilian crusts Sepultura you'd be excused for drawing comparison with a single-nation-led occupation where Megadeth arrive in longboats with Kurt Cobain and the rest of the Sub-Pop roster to steal our northern industrial goth-girls and get smacked-up in our chippies.

The mainstream music press can take the credit for inspiring my American fetish. American bands always dominated the pages of the glossies I took my record-buying cues from, as well as their end of year awards, questionnaires and opinion polls etc. This is illustrated perfectly by the distinction in these deluded award ceremonies between Best Band (invariable American), and Best British Band etc. I therefore grew up making a reductive distinction between a 'top-class band' (that is, one from the USA) and the local, homebred bands that deserved the stigma-soaked accolade of 'top-class UK band'. To my memory the two titles were always mutually exclusive.

For a young MTV entranced metallic-grunger beyond the USA and UK the musical map was a barren desert. European bands were mostly jokes from the eighties. Eurovision (and later on no-budget titillation telly-programme Euro Trash) proved that nothing remotely cool could emanate from the continent. The merest whiff of an attempt to tap this source of fresh alt-rock wasn't worth the risk of playground humiliation – "You like Rammstein? – I'm going to kill you." Even an AC/DC patch would warrant a good weeks bullying and crap Neighbours impressions.

In school the framework for my musical development was laid down. Particular musical genres and bands were no longer something you offhandedly listened to, they became a direct comment on who you were, how cool you were, how much you knew, how many friends you could have and how far you'd get with girls. School, as it is often stated, is cruel. How the overweight, wax-jacketed farmer's boy in my year that loved Meatloaf would survive in an age of happy-slapping and faked Myspace profiles is barely worth imagining.

So, in order to know what's OK to listen to on the Walkman during maths we fell back on the judgement of elder siblings checked against the latest copies of Metal Hammer, Kerrang and Raw to make doubly sure we weren't going to make a grave error like the unlucky chap with a Levellers-loving juggler for a brother.

How I'd love to travel back in time now, waving my back issues of Bananafish purchased in a newly opened Japanese noise record shop in Berlin in my own RHCP-loving face. "Fuck You! You think that shit is edgy and cool – your just being sold lowest common denominator bullshit – there's nothing revolutionary about major label endorsed 'alt rock'

– its all a con. You're just another demographic lapping up this top-down industry-led entertainment and what's worse you think you're the opposite! Get over it. Relax. Listen to Black Sabbath and mum's Fleetwood Mac records with pride."

But to my shock, my 14-year old self and school friends could cheekily retort with the exact same argument. "No, Fuck You! You go to All Tomorrows Parties, Hoover up the Touch and Go back catalogue, get excited over tape labels, Thurston Moore, 'fringe music' all-dayers etc. What's the difference? You're still doing exactly the same fucking thing - fetishising music and letting what you choose to listen to characterise you. Even the social group you knock about in is music-led. And you're 13 years older. "

It's sadly true. In many senses my record purchases still shape who I am and who I talk to, although, I hope, in a less calculated and self-conscious manner than as teen. The relational aspect to the music might have more political undertones - as I'm supporting 'smaller guys' and in so doing contributing to a community of like-minded, rather than fashion-conscious, music lovers - but its still music, and as such is subject to the same trappings as the school ground.

A question I dwell on is why, when we have every band at our finger-tips (through the internet and the sheer number of bands passing through on the buzzing global DIY circuit), are we still intent on gathering round a relatively specific bunch of bands like kids round some found scrut? And why, when the DIY/punk/underground/fringe/whatever music community that I associate with because it questions the validity of some of my teen conventions, do a disproportionate number of these bands tend to be, you probably guessed where I'm heading, American?

Let me provide a few illustrations. In Leeds 6 you can go and see bands every night. In this environment it's the gig that matters, not who the bands are or the hype surrounding them. The DIY scene laughs in the face of the backstage area, soppy fawning over rock-stars and all the other elitist customs ingrained in rock history. These sweaty cunts drive their own vans for fucks sake. It doesn't make a difference where you come from, but what you play.

However, time and time again the USA band headlined bills are the ones that draw the most attention, make people forget they have work the next day or shake off their Saturday evening hangovers, and of course, command higher door prices. The bands and artists that get excitedly talked about and have their records burned to CDR and passed around are mostly American. The reason you might pick up this fanzine is because of the promise of an American band interview inside.

Obviously there are numerous exceptions to this rule and the DIY scene is much more tolerant and accepting of bands from unconventional places than say the NME obsessed indie scene. However, the inherent added interest in American bands is enough to make promoters consider lying about where the headline act is from, just to see if more people come. "Whatever you do guys don't talk between songs, if the crowd twig that you're from Hungary I've got a lot of explaining to do."

So, again, why is it? Why are American bands more deserving of our attention? Is it because they're better?

- One argument is that it's a big risk for bands from America to travel so far and that they therefore have to have had more experience playing in order to want to try it.

- Another is that there's a fuck load more bands in America than anywhere else (an accumulation of numerous factors including more people, more detached homes with garages to play in, more rock music on the radio etc) so it's a probability of numbers that most 'good' bands will be from USA.

- Another is that its cultural conditioning, that after a history of better music they're closer to the 'action' and so its easier for them to draw direct influence.

- Jonny Ford, in a similar discussion on the internet, suggested that America has better drummers because of its tradition of high school marching bands.

Whatever the reasons, most don't really sit comfortably with a DIY approach or ethos, particularly when 'underground music' has swapped ideals of virtuosity and majority-rule collective opinion for punk democracy and 'outsider' originality. By the DIY benchmark the best music should come out of the Balkan equivalent to Sowerby Bridge, not the world's most consumer driven superpower.

I see my own favoured-bias for American bands as a nasty hangover from those initial apprehensive steps taken towards finding my 'musical personality', where the American dominated magazine pages gave more gleam and magic to exotic rarities such as Billy Corgan's bonce. Its rarity that plays the key role in perpetuating the USA fetish. Bands from America supposedly play less n the UK than bands from UK or Europe, so going to see them is a 'rare opportunity'. In turn the records are of more value because they might be the only way to experience the music.

Rarity injects something with more value, it's an age-old selling technique applied to commodify any old tat and it's this concept that is manipulated by multinationals and punks alike. Closing down sales, time-sensitive reductions, seasonal flavoured crisps, Ltd edition CDRs, one-off live collaboration performances, original line-up reformations, special band-curated festivals or live 'legendary album' playbacks. They all meld into one big ploy to keep me thinking that what I *can* experience can't be missed. Its mostly American bands that feel the benefits of this love affair with the rare as I've been conditioned to believe they are the rarest of all.

The alternative to the rare is the everyday, the abundant, the plentiful, the usual, the well-known and well-liked, the unavoidable and the local. These qualities have power to strike fear into the hearts of people who have allowed (or relied on) music taste to characterise themselves for much of their lives. Music that is easily accessible and known by all, loses its power to say anything in particular about the listener. This is the underlying thinking that keeps fashionistas jumping from one style to the next, terrified of being caught up by the crowd, and explains the egotistical self assuredness allied to the avant-garde in politics and art.

In DIY music circles this tense relationship with the familiar or local is even odder. The pull towards championing bands like Bilge Pump who are to all intents and purposes as good as any band you are likely to see (refer to my previous article on music criticism for what makes a band 'good') is counterbalanced by a desire to hunt out the rare and celebrate the lesser-known. It means that, even in a scene that does its best to

denounce any competitive or hierarchical elements, bands who's music can be experienced pretty regularly are given the runners-up accolade of 'a great UK band' or 'excellent local band' and not treated to the relentless fervour that American bands receive, unless of course it's a special or rare occasion.

This is where the indie-kids, the music fans that like music regardless or ignorant of political or social conditions, step in. They are the kind of music fans that find out about bands through mainstream magazines and newspapers, Myspace and elder siblings. Although they may like local bands because they might 'get big', their championing of the local demonstrates a real commitment and engagement to their surroundings - the kind of focused energy and celebration of community the DIY scene pertains to. It may well be projecting behaviour saved for 'real rock stars' on to their friends because they are yet to develop an alternative way of acting, but they are no less deluded than the ATP/Belgian noise fest goer who thinks they are not fulfilling a set of behaviours based on rarity and the commodification of music.

Who's really afraid of the dark area in music, the area that says nothing about who you are, that doesn't individuate you, that maybe even says the completely wrong thing about you? Who's willing to embrace not the music you've chosen, but the music that surrounds you, the music that is totally available at all times, by all the people around you - the local bands, the regional talent, the stuff on your doorstep, the bands you can see every night of the week in every venue, the bands with very little eBay value? A real rejection of all those automated teen behaviours that kept me flicking through rock weeklies requires a reappraisal of the local and a rejection of the value of rarity in music. It's bad news for Dave Mustaine but great news for the Chantel McGregor band. See you down the front of the Brown Cow in Bingley.