

A MODERN DAY GUIDE TO MUSIC CRITICISM FOR PRODUCTIVE TYPES

PT 1. A musical education? Erasing the future possibilities of a dodgy metal past.

By Andrew Abbott

Between 1991-1999 I went to school in a town with one music shop. The town was Matlock; the music shop was 'Play'. In my first few years of having some cash to spend on music, the music I bought came exclusively from this shop. This tended towards a large heap of wazz, including Def Leppard tape singles, Stone Temple Pilots CDs and Soundgarden picture disc 7 inches. I remember getting particularly upset at school that a copy of 'Eat the rich' by Aerosmith got nicked alongside my Walkman. My friends that bought music from the same source were more in to indie; meaning Lemonheads, Sparklehorse, Levellers, Blind Melon. Almost only awful crap. Nonetheless, we were all friends because of our shared interest in music, played in bands, put on gigs, made decisions that music was our 'thing' and that it would be forever.

My musical taste developed with the years to include more metal, bad indie and 'mental' electronica thanks to a few infrequent trips to Fopp (formerly Warp(ed)) in Sheffield. In the last couple of years before I moved away from Matlock to Leeds, aged 18 in 1999, I knew I was listening to music that didn't press any of my buttons. Bitterness set in. I took hold of a deluded belief that the teenage post-grunge bands I was in were both responsible for, and capable of, filling a musical void present in the world's contemporary rock scene.

1999 came and being in a big city remedied this fast. Trips to Jumbo, Out Of Step and attending lots of gigs in pubs bestowed me with actual experiences of music I had previously only hoped might exist somewhere in the world. Now there were records that I liked from the eighties, from European bands, from 'unsigned' bands etc. everywhere. There were more records to my taste available on my doorstep than my turd warehouse wage would ever allow. The records and bands were laid out in front of me like a banquet table of infinite length. Each new record bought, or band seen, opened up another 6 records or bands that I would like equally. Friends recommended things, eBay and online record stores put everything within reach. Within a year my tastes had expanded to include more styles of music and number of artists than I had encountered in the previous 18 years of my life.

So, to make a point of this anecdote, with no access point to find out about mail-order or punk fanzines, having parents with dubious record collections, and being untrusting of radio, my formative years were dictated by the current stock of 'Play'. The few positives coming from this being that I actually *loved* Metallica and a couple of other bands, as I obsessively listened to a handful of CDs, and that I spent a lot of time playing music with friends, as that was the only way to hear music we liked. The greatest side-effect of a dodgy metal (and grunge) past was that when I finally found access points to 'good' music, it was much the same as blindly coming across a lactating teat, and I have greedily appreciated every drop since.

Now, lets 'Quantum Leap' back into the body of a 12 year old in 2006, or more tastefully, imagine myself as a 12 year old with all the wonders of 2006's modern technology at my disposal. 'Play' can fuck off straight away. Soulseek, Myspace, Mp3s, online fanzines, music forums etc. mean I have instantaneous access to all

music I could ever like, with the added bonus that a few extra clicks will make me find the most underground, most rad music in the fucking world within minutes.

This clearly isn't fiction. 15-year old girls dance around like mentalists to Melt Banana in Grimsby social clubs, 14-year old boys in Preston own half the Load records back catalogue. All that was once the privilege of kids with cooler elder siblings, or that lived within a train ride distance of a city with a decent indie record shop, or that had found a weird fanzine called 'Kill Everyone Now' on a bus home, is the right of everyone with broadband in the family home. Whilst mum's cooking tea, Billy's downloading Whitehouse and sending friend requests to Chilean grind duos. The average dodgy metal past lasts approximately as long as it takes to link from Papa Roach to Burzum, which is about half the time it takes to navigate through the new release section of a small town record shop. The kids that want 'cool' have got it, and they don't have to wait, or work, for it.

Great. Death to over-hyped, cunningly manufactured industry clones of 'underground' heroes with actual musical integrity. Now that the original is equally accessible even without big money behind it, you can't be sold a second rate version of the same thing. Would Stone Temple Pilots ever exist in 2006? Lets cocking hope not. Additionally, kids have the ability to try out lots of music without having to waste shoe-shine money or playground drug cash. Mum and Dad simply need the £15 a month Digital TV and internet package, and the £1000 worth of hardware, to fund a lifetimes worth of iTunes and a CDR library.

However, all is not rosey. As anyone who is in the slightest bit interested in social theory, Baudrillard, the Situationist International or simple fresh air and sports, the 'net is the most evil stinking waste of time the modern world concocted, only trumped in the 'invention most likely to be responsible for the decline of civilisation' stakes by nuclear weapons and metal. The internet is virtual reality posing as everything that can and should be real. Real conversations, meetings, friendships and experiences are being usurped by an amalgamation of work-wasting typing, short hand messages and smileys.

As far as this applies to music the difference between pre-internet times and the present is subtler. People have been experiencing music in a fake form passed off as real since the invention of recorded music. Air guitar playing is concrete evidence. When you listen to a recording of music that has at some point been performed by real, actual people, what images play through in your mind? With a few drugged exceptions or elaborations from 'creative types', it is your mind's invention of the performance. Ask most people what they are thinking about when they listen to drums on an album and the answer will be 'Drumming'. From my own teenage mind-experience: heavy music = a cool band totally thrashing around like mentalists conducting a mosh pit, whilst quiet music = contemplative good-looker bathed in candlelight to an audience of one. Records are a substitute experience of a real thing, documentation that takes the place of, lives longer, and eventually reaches more people, than the original event was capable of.

I am aware that by accepting this definition of recorded music as a residue of an original performance the fact that music, once recorded and played in a different site, is a thing in its own right that, is overlooked. But this will be a temporary overlooking. All noise-bands, drone lovers, electronic experimenters and sonic artists suffer the same fate at the pasty hands of the internet.

Although records can be construed as fake experiences passed off as real, they are infinitely preferable to the brevity and poor quality of the experience of music on the internet. Bands entire works are condensed in to the first 30 seconds of a random mp3. 'Yeah, I've heard them, wasn't that in to it.' Music has to be immediately gratifying or else so highly hyped on music forums that people are willing to spend time with it. This has taken the place of the *real* experience of once having bought a CD, taking it home and realising it's a bit shit, but keeping at it until you actually start 'getting it', which in some cases is the most rewarding experience of music listening.

So, the kids are getting a musical education delivered much faster and at a younger age. But is it as qualitatively good? Are they learning anything for themselves? Do they fully appreciate what they are listening to *and* understand it, or are they just hearing confusing noise and saying they like it so they have something cool to write on their jotters? Is this opportunity for a future society of music lovers *without* a dodgy metal past being wasted? More importantly, if it is, should we really give a flying fuck?

PT 2. Why music is shit and the role of performance.

Lets assume for the moment that nowadays, due to better (more self-directed) exposure to music, people are getting a 'better' musical education. Now, a better musical education entails what exactly? Who is more musically educated than another person? The person with the most records? The person who has heard the most bands? The person who knows of, and listens to, the most current of the avant-garde? The person with the widest ranging musical taste? The person with the most sincere love for their favourite band/genre? The accolade of 'someone who knows a lot about music' often goes to anyone who proves they possess all these qualities; the 'music expert'. Of course these people should be revered, their opinions are more valid than ours, they should work in record shops and tell us what to buy, write for fanzines, and most importantly be the people that write and perform the music we listen to. Why? Because they know what is good music and what is bad. Because they know best.

Or maybe they don't. If music is going to be considered an art form, as many of these 'music experts' pronounce it is (if not the highest form of art), then like any art that doesn't belong to the outdated school of self-indulgent wankings, it should always consider its audience. In order for 'art' to be 'good' and serve any social function it should be audience-responsive. There is no use in spending time on creating a thing of interest, no matter how sophisticated or original, if the person who sees it has no clue what it is, or what the point of it is. Musicians, like artists, can be responsible for communicating an idea or emotion through a chosen media, whilst 'entertaining', and therefore need to constantly keep in mind to whom they are communicating, and who they are entertaining.

Couple this with the infinite degrees of 'musical education' an audience passes through, and it is clear that knowing 'the most' about music bears hardly any relevance to whether music (as an artform) is good or not. For every musician who believes that they breaking the mold detuning their guitar slightly, using a loop pedal, having 3 female vocalists, rolling peas on a piano, getting their cock out or playing disco indie, there is an audience who will find it equally innovative and entertaining. As long as performer and audience are on the same page, then the music as 'art' is equally valid, no matter what form it takes. As mentioned earlier, a

musical education means fuck all anyway, anyone with an internet connection and the inclination can follow a path of musical geekery if they so choose. It's like choosing to learn backgammon, and of similar worth.

Comments like this will not sit well in the camp of music lovers and musicians convinced music has the capability to reveal greater truths. For some, music is more than simple entertainment; lyrics mean something, noise is powerful and cathartic, dancing is the most fun ever. All of which is true, but of course not universal. Many more people have cried at Schindlers List than over Best of Leonard Cohen, just as many people are 'pumped up' by rugby league as would be by some blast beats. Overall, who cares?

Before this gets too clichéd and nihilistic let me throw in a lifesaver. There is an area of music that, however momentarily, can provide performer and audience with one of those rare moments of genuine involvement and participation available in a culture of passive consumption - a real experience in an increasingly constructed reality. It has little to do with music though.

As a little historical background lets go back to John Cage and the school of experimental music in New York in the late fifties. Nam June Paik or La Monte Young or someone of similar standing, is throwing keys in air and catching them again in one of the new/concrete music workshops to add to an improvised composition. During this performance he realises that rather than playing the sound of throwing and catching keys, he is performing the action of throwing and catching keys, as music. That is, the performance takes precedent over the noise produced; the 'music' and action are inseparable.

This is the beginning of a whole host of music as actions, performances, happenings and interventions. Check out documentation of Fluxus music festivals that take over entire towns in Denmark ending with the sky crashing in and people walking across lakes. The influence of this form of music as action is seen most strongly in current avant-garde Wire-endorsed type shit, but it applies to everything from Franz Ferdinand down/up.

Once you remove the subjective, and pretty much unimportant, aspect of musical performance that is the 'style' or 'type of' music a group or individual make, you are left with a series of actions. Like the imagined pictures in my 15-year old head of mental moshing and flipping around, or delicate stroking and whispering, but *real*, as in actually happening right there, in front of you. A person or group of people concentrating on doing something that you are party to, sometimes voyeuristic, sometimes participatory (if you feel like responding with movement or 'dancing') but always engaging. Like watching children play games, men beat the shit out of each other, or homo politicians deliver teary-eyed speeches. Performance is a period of time to witness something really sincere and honest, of revelry in fun, something that, at its best, is purely concerned with that moment and nothing before or beyond it.

Now personally, I couldn't give a shit whether that is a man tapping a table or a pop punk band playing Dag Nasty covers. Once the sullen boundaries created by being embittered by the kind of music, or the content of what you see at a gig is transcended, all that is left is whether the action you witness is sincere. More hippishly, 'if everyone is having a good time, it is good' and chances are you will have a good time too. Music's chance to prove itself as an artform is where it acts as

the catalyst for an event or happening in which performer and audience are 'on the same page'. Ever hear Kirk Hammet talk about the 'waves of energy' passed between audience and band at Metallica's arena shows? Like that.

Obviously the shared real experience is not limited to arena gigs, it can happen anywhere, with any number of people. The type of music is unimportant. For those that think it is, then there are no doubt plenty of gigs where the music performed is 'good' *and* everyone has a good time, but don't believe that that has any more worth than any other gig, where the catalyst is any other style of performance. It is just as likely to occur in the practice room of a community centre in Derbyshire as it is at a Belgian noise festival or as it is at a gymnastics competition.

So, what are the connotations for the erasure of 'the dodgy metal past' out of history? A society of kids who think they have only ever listened to 'good' music and won't accept anything else. No shitey CD collection to remind them that, once, they had fun listening to crap, that it really didn't make any difference to anyone at the time. Kids that turn in to adults that feel they might be tainted somehow by attending a gig of anything less than the utmost quality. Thereby, missing out on a host of *real* experiences by spending the time you could be at a gig, meeting people, drinking, talking 'IRL', by hunting down a Merzbow live bootleg on your new iMac. Music is great, a great access point to doing things in a pro-active way, taking responsibility for your own entertainment, starting conversations with strangers. But by only accepting 'good' music as valid negates all that. As a thing in itself, music amounts to little more than a diversion, to attach any more importance to it than that is to delude yourself, but as performance, like any real experience, it is worth keeping hold of and experiencing whenever and wherever possible. In most cases, even the shit is less shit than the shit on TV or at home.

Andy Abbott is funded by Lottery money to do art things and write bits (available to find out about at www.black-dogs.org), He also plays music in the band That Fucking Tank and other outfits. 'Dodgy metal past' is a phrase borrowed from a conversation with Andrew Raine, for which he should be credited.