Music Made for TV: Reassessing the History of Pop Music in/on Television

No Uneasy Relationship, Just Uneasy Scholarship

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When I first read Simon Frith's 2002 article, "Look! Hear! The uneasy relationship of music and television," I could understand why he believed that the relationship was uneasy. After all, decades of criticism and scholarship, not to mention ideology, told us that it was. Television represented all that was wrong with commercial culture, while some popular music – but not all – appeared to rise above it.

The paragraph that he opened with put the commonsense belief about the relationship in a nutshell, and for that reason I want to quote it almost in entirety: "In the popular music literature there are two broad views of television. On the one hand, it is understood as a medium of great importance. It is the most effective tool of star-making and record promotion…On the other hand, television is thought not to be very important at all. Music has not been a central part of its programming. The television audience is rarely conceived as a music audience. TV-made pop stars almost always lack musical credibility." (Frith, 2002) The second part of the paragraph is echoed in the article's conclusion: "TV, for all its influence on rock performance, was never really part of its culture."

The problem, as I see it, is with the "literature" he refers to. Who thinks that television is not important? How is a "central part of programming" defined? Why and how is a music audience different from a television audience? Who decides who is musically credible? Notice the slippage from "popular music" in Frith's first paragraph to "rock" in his conclusion. Rock, as we're all aware, is a residual genre and cultural formation. Ideology provided a smokescreen that obscured that rock was, like television, just another lucrative part of the entertainment industry.

Popular music scholarship emerged from two sources, early rock criticism and sociology as inflected by the Birmingham School as formative cultural studies. The former depended upon the policing of boundaries and binaries, the latter on structuralism, class, and semiotics. Indeed, sociological approaches to popular music and its industry are the deep structures, if you will, of a great deal of academic inquiry. It's time to change the questions, or to ask them from a different point of view, that of media studies.

For example, Frith did concede that TV had an influence on rock performance. But how did rock, and before it, rock and roll performers learn to perform? Here's an answer, from my research: English producer Jack Good invented rock and roll performance style for British television in the mid to late 1950s. Most rock and roll performers did not have the natural gifts of Elvis Presley. Good, identifying

excitement as the most authentic thing about rock and roll setting about generating it on television. He costumed performers, and coached them in ways to use their bodies and faces in order to elicit responses from the audience.

Inspired by theatre, not film, Good and his director Rita Gillespie used the technical tools of television, lighting, camerawork, and mise-en-scene, as well as dancing and movement of bodies on stage, to create excitement on screen and off. The Beatles, David Bowie, Andrew Loog-Oldham and Mark Bolan were avid viewers. What if authenticity in popular music was based on excitement, not a hard to discern notion of "truth to the self?" Would genres and audiences be as separated? What hidden histories, artists, audiences, and practices would we recover?

Media scholars have to accept that popular music is media, with inherent power relations. We also have to bring identity back into the conversation about and analysis of popular music. For example, in my forthcoming book about popular music on television before MTV, I assert that television spread popular music culture – its sound, its look, its attitude, and more – to those not hailed by rock music's address or included in its discursive sphere or on its stages, including women, children, teenage girls and "the mainstream." Television reached into the heartland, and assembled the American teenage audience for rock and roll in the 1950s and 1960s. Television showed us how to dance, dress, and act. It gave those us of too young or too female, for example, our "own" groups to love. For me, the Monkees and other made-for-TV bands were the gateway drug to other music. By the late 1960s, television and film started to resemble rock and roll in spirit and more. Television did not "mainstream" rock and roll, but hastened rock and roll's takeover of the mainstream.

The relationship between television and popular music is not and has never been uneasy. The relationship, because its analysis can question rock ideology and mythology, makes critics and some scholars uneasy. That's a good thing.