Book Report #2, *Performing Rites: On The Value Of Popular Music* by Simon Frith

Back in August, a group of friends and I got together to watch the Video Music Awards, where midway through the show, Miley Cyrus took the stage in what was to become one of the most widely talked about performances of 2013. After her racy “twerking” and tongue-filled rendition of her hit single, “We Can’t Stop”, my friends and I were immediately divided into two camps of discourse: the “Miley-is-an-artistic-genius” cluster and the “quick-kill-it-with-fire-before-it-breeds” group. This division among the Miley lovers and haters was astoundingly a reflection of socio-musicologist, Simon Frith’s distinction between high and low music, where high music is regarded as art aimed at generating discussion, and low music is industry-constructed, gimmicky muck aimed solely at generating profit with little intellectual value. Subsequently, I learned two things from the 2013 VMA’s, that there’s nothing one can do with a foam finger that won’t be aired on live television, and that Simon Frith’s arguments from *Performing Rites: On The Value Of Popular Music* can be applied to nearly any popular music phenomenon, even Miley Cyrus.

I will admit that I have shamelessly been a Frith groupie since I first read his book, *Sound Effects*, which provides an understanding of how rock & roll functions as an art, a culture, and a business rooted in a long history of “high” and “low” periods. Apart from remaining one of my academic crushes, Simon Frith is the Tovey Chair of Music at Edinburgh University and a founding member of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, with work appearing in *Let It Rock* magazine, the *Sunday Times*, and New York’s *Village Voice*. As both a music enthusiast and Frith admirer, I was extremely eager to read *Performing Rites: On The Value Of Popular Music*, because it lays out in prodigious detail what exactly we talk about, when we talk about music.

Frith’s central aim is to inform “high” music snobs, who appear to know very little about popular music sociology, seemingly convinced of pop music’s lack of artistic merit, that contrariwise popular music does have intellectual value and can offer a lens to a greater social aesthetic. Separated into three sections, Music Talk, On Music Itself, and Why Music Matters, he covers everything from the modes of popular music discourse to the technological impacts on music making. However, it was with Frith’s discussion of “high” and “low” culture that I found myself most intrigued. Frith claims that there are three spheres of popular music discourse: artistic or academic significance, authenticity, and entertainment value. “High” music is authentic and imbedded with artistic meaning, while “low” music is constructed and discussed solely for its entertainment value (Frith, 1996).

Frith’s examination of “high” and “low” music closely reminded me of Kelefah Sanneh’s radical *New York Times* article, “The Rap Against Rockism”, in which he states that “rockism means idolizing the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lionizing punk while barely tolerating disco; loving the live show and hating the music video; extolling the growling performer while hating the lip-syncher”, (Sanneh, 2004). Rockism creates a dominant paradigm where rock music is considered authentic, and rock musicians are viewed as true careerists as opposed to pop opportunists. Rockism permeates our thinking about all types of music, from hip-hop to country to euro-dance tracks.
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Frith would contend that the “rockist” paradigm prevents people from understanding that even those pop opportunists, who may not have spent years slaving away at their craft, have value simply by virtue of their ability to generate discourse and collective thinking.

According to Frith, “pop tastes do not just derive from our socially constructed identities; they also help to shape them”, (Frith, 1996). Popular music helps construct a sense of self-identity, and furthermore it offers membership to a wider community of like-minded individuals. In Simon McLeish’s book review, which summarizes Frith’s framework for popular music as an identity construct, he states that “if we regard different genres of popular music as equal in merit, comparing the things people write about them...the major difference...is in the community of the genre’s fans”, (McLeish, 1998). Pop music, including even the most seemingly pop-opportunistic artists, allows people to become part of a fandom rooted in discussion of that music, and on this Frith and I couldn’t agree more.

Whether it’s Beliebers, Directioners, or Lady Gaga’s Little Monsters, these ever-growing fan communities prove that popular music, much to the rockists’ dismay, has the ability to construct networks of like-mindedness. These intricate networks have given rise to entire subcultures, from rude boys to riot girls to transgendered seapunks, and a wide assortment of other unique groups. Despite if you love her or love to hate her, Miley Cyrus is the living embodiment of Simon Frith’s conclusion that pop music matters, because it has the ability to generate spheres of discussion and distinction. The next time my friends and I discuss the “ratchedness” vs. the artistic brilliance of Miss Cyrus, I may recommend that they pick up a copy of Simon Frith’s Performing Rites: On The Value Of Popular Music, because it brilliantly illuminates the very fundamentals of our musical discourse.

Bibliography, APA Style:


