
Book Review: *No Machos Or Pop Stars: When the Leeds Art Experiment Went Punk*

Gavin Butt. *No Machos Or Pop Stars: When the Leeds Art Experiment Went Punk*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 312 pages.

The story of popular music has long been told through oral histories. The pioneering work here, I guess, was Nat Hentoff and Nat Shapiro's 1955 *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz As Told by the Men Who Made It*; the first rock version that I can remember was Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's 1996 *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored History of Punk*. Since then, compiling an oral history—by the men and women who were there—has become the narrative norm for studies of particular music worlds (such as J. P. Bean's 2014 *Singing From the Floor: A History of the British Folk Club*), venues (most recently, David Brathchpiece and Kirstin Innes's 2021 *Brickwork: A Biography of the Arches*)¹ and local scenes (such as Martin Lilleker's 2005 *Beats Working for a Living: The Story of Popular Music in Sheffield 1973-1984*).

Gavin Butt's *No Machos Or Pop Stars* is an unusual addition to this tradition of pop scholarship. It is focused on the musicians who emerged from the Leeds art school scene between 1974 and 1981. He organizes his chapters around the origin stories of the best-known bands from that scene: Gang of Four, the Mekons, Delta 5, Scritti Politti, Fad Gadget, and Soft Cell. The book follows their initial footsteps to a sort of stardom through a collage of quotes from a wide variety of involved parties. Judging by his acknowledgments, Butt spoke to at least 92 people associated with the scene. It is also well illustrated by memorabilia, including photos, artworks, newspaper and magazine cuttings, and concert posters.

But the book is different from most such oral histories in two ways. First, Butt is an academic and not a journalist. He wants to theorize as well as to record and report. Second, the scene in which he is interested is not a venue or a town but an art school or, rather, two art schools: the art departments at Leeds University and Leeds Polytechnic. In Butt's own words, *No Machos Or Pop Stars* offers "an in-depth case study of the transformed world-making powers of art school groups as they persisted into the late 1970s and early 1980s" (18). It is, "at least in part, an extended study of modern

1. Kistin Innes also brilliantly uses this form of storytelling in her 2020 novel *Scabby Queen*.

institutional disillusionment and of how people band together in attempts to surpass it” (xiii). From this perspective, to form a band is less a career move than the pursuit of “a utopia of togetherness.” This is Butt on the Mekons:

Thinking too one-dimensionally about the Mekons’ purported “failures” [to rise to the call of history!] can blind us to their sustained exploration of the dialectics of group participation, where the hope for social change mingles with hard-headed recognition of the forces that might block it. After painting, after performance art, even after punk: it is the social, relational form of “the band” that [Mark] White and his compatriots mine the possibilities thereof (151).

This is not the sort of argument I recall from any of the other band histories on my shelves, but then this book is as much an oral history of art school theory as of musical practice. The dynamic of its narrative flow is a dispute between two ways of valorizing art education. On the one hand, the sweaty belief in art as untrammelled self-realization, as shocking and disruptive to conventional mores. This approach is represented by Jeff Nuttall and his colleagues at Leeds Poly. On the other hand, the cool deconstruction of form and function, which is represented here by T. J. Clark and his colleagues at Leeds Uni. Interestingly, though Butt doesn’t mention this, a similar dispute about the value of rock music was also taking place in the pages of *New Musical Express* between Charles Shaar Murray and Paul Morley in their reviews of the Leeds cohort at the time.

As a detailed account of a particularly disputational moment in academic history, *No Machos Or Pop Stars* is fascinating, instructive, and fun. It is refreshing to read a book about art schools and popular music which spends time exploring what the musicians did in their classes and studios, and Butt’s use of oral history is indeed an excellent way of bringing to life these students’ art school experiences: their nervous excitement, immediate confusion, and gradual disillusionment. If nothing else this text will be a key for understanding the history of art education in the UK.

As a contribution to popular music studies, though, the book’s argument is in some respects problematic. A conclusion one could draw from Butt’s account is that these bands’ music was made despite, not because of, their art school education. This reading reveals the limitations of this sort of oral history, specifically the lack of comparative data and the absence of certain voices. Butt, not surprisingly, takes for granted that popular music is a kind of artwork. Performance becomes performance art. Sound becomes sonic art. And the work of presenting and selling the music to consumers becomes graphic design, stage design, promotional art, and music videos. This approach continues the deeply embedded ideological distinction of art from both commerce and craft, resulting in the silencing of voices from non-art collaborators who were necessary for the realization of these bands’ ambitions, such as their managers, agents, label teams, promoters, and publicists.

At the same time, we get very little sense of music-making in the rest of Leeds and what effect this had on the art school musicians’ ideas and opportunities. Furthermore, what was the situation in the late 1970s in other UK cities with significant art schools, such as Bristol, Glasgow, and Birmingham? As a working critic during this period, I was gratefully

aware of a spate of bands making joyously difficult-to-define music: The Slits (formed in 1976), the Pop Group and the Raincoats (1977), PIL and the Au Pairs (1978), Orange Juice (1979), and Depeche Mode (1980). In their different ways, all these bands combined politics and art, dance and ideology, and running commentaries on the notion of “popularity.” The Leeds bands were neither uniquely adventurous nor uniquely anxious about art and commerce nor, indeed, uniquely utopian. Butt describes the familiar artist’s issue with commercial success in class terms. How can artists, removed by their high-flown education from the everyday, address “ordinary” people? He quotes Marc Almond:

We were a bit tired of the arty side of things by then [1979/80] . . . three years and we’d seen everybody just trying to be outrageous and shocking. Stapling budgies to boards and smashing up bowls of goldfish . . . It was just getting very boring . . . I believe in putting over your art and ideas to as wide a variety of people as possible. You should be accessible. People should be able to understand what the hell you’re on about. I know it’s compromising. But I think you should entertain to educate. Not preach to the converted (219).

Almond is referring here to a familiar problem in popular music history: is making music to entertain rather than to enlighten to betray one’s belief in music as art? Butt suggests that the pursuit of pop success is not just the pursuit of riches or fame. Popular culture is also a privileged location where, as Butt invokes Stuart Hall in his epilogue, “the popular imaginary gets itself expressed” (226). I find the argument that it was the “popular imaginary” that inspired these art students to make music persuasive. What *No Machos Or Pop Stars* captures is a local experience of the moment in popular music history when the popular imaginary moved from the charts to the dance floor. Butt’s chapter on Marc Almond and Dave Ball’s experiments with sound and performance is titled “Rehearsals for the Mutant Disco,” an obvious nod to the Ze Records anthology first released in 1981, which was subtitled *A Subtle Discolation of the Norm*. But the chapter also reminded me of an album released in 1970: Pete Brown and Piblokto!’s *Things May Come and Things May Go but the Art School Dance Goes on Forever*.

Simon Frith
University of Edinburgh
Email: simon.frith@ed.ac.uk