

Towards a Framework for Creativity in Popular Music Degrees

Pre-publication version¹

Introduction: Music education and popular music education

Let us begin with semantics. The only reason we might use the term ‘popular music degree’ is to differentiate its content from that of a ‘music degree’ – not ‘classical music degree’, but ‘music degree’. That is to say, the *default* semantic in higher music education is to assume that ‘music’ means ‘classical music’, despite the fact that the Western Art-music/classical canon represents a only a tiny proportion of the music that global society consumes today, and an even smaller proportion of what has been produced historically. Specialized music education in the developed world is dominated by the Western classical music tradition, and in higher education this is historically characterized by the ‘conservatoire’². In the seventeenth century the primary function of the earliest French and Italian music schools developed out of the church’s need for composers to write music, and singers to perform it. As the demand for secular instrumental music expanded, what we might call the ‘Naples model’ of selective conservatoires spread across Europe³; their primary *raison d’être* was to train instrumental and vocal performers to achieve sufficient expertise to play the music of the day (Nettl, 1995; Papageorgi et al., 2010; Parkinson, 2013; Stakelum, 2013).

I begin this chapter about popular music curricula by talking about classical conservatoires in order to demonstrate that the latter were called into existence with an employability⁴ agenda – to provide people who could fulfil society’s musical needs. The Enlightenment’s music industry needed, in descending order of quantity, players to fill its orchestras, teachers to sustain itself and, occasionally, composers to provide content for the first two groups to play and teach. These were some of the drivers of conservatoire institutional admissions decisions and curriculum designs.

Much has been written about how instrumentalists learn, and some authors (Freeman, 2014; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Hallam et al., 2012; Small, 1998) have begun to argue for a more holistic approach to conservatoire music education that adds more contextual listening, composing and entrepreneurial skills to the historically dominant instrument-based tradition. Learning to play an instrument requires ‘interiorized’ physical skills acquisition, as famously articulated in David Sudnow’s autoethnographic account of learning to play jazz piano, *Ways Of The Hand* (1993). As Dreyfus (in Sudnow, 1993, p. xi) notes, the iterative

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² In Australia, ‘conservatorium’; in the USA ‘conservatory’.

³ For a historically-specific description of this spread see Freeman (2014, Kindle loc. 641)

⁴ Not all of these societal needs related to professional musicians. Music making was also considered a social activity, and the conservatoires had a partly social agenda. Robert Freeman (2014, Kindle loc. 649) notes that the European conservatoires of the early 1800s were ‘anti-intellectual’ with a ‘Protestant ethic’, and that one of their functions was to develop music skills in young ladies ‘as a social grace and as a means of attracting a good husband.’ Freeman argues that during the twentieth century US conservatories shifted from primarily training musicians for music education and social cohesion towards an aspiration to ‘develop graduates who can fill the nation’s very small number of professional positions in the performance of classical music’.

learning through repetition implicit in teaching our bodies to play an instrument is the opposite of the ‘cognitivist theory of skill acquisition’:

Rather than moving from specific cases to abstract principles, skill acquisition seems to move in the opposite direction, from principles followed until they are interiorized, to the possession of so many types of concrete cases that the types of responses that each situation leads fluidly to the next. (Dreyfus, in Sudnow, 1993, p. xi)

I shall call this approach ‘instrumentalism’; learner and teacher alike are concerned with the internalisation of sophisticated motor and audio/visual recognition skills required to play an instrument or to sing, with supporting activities such as aural acuity and harmonic literacy. These skills bring with them forms of cognition, but Sudnow’s experience demonstrates that instrumental skills cannot be developed through cognition alone. Speaking as a musician, composer and musicologist, but as someone who cannot play the violin, I may understand the instrument cognitively; I have some knowledge of its range, construction, timbral qualities and its role in various ensembles and repertoire, and I might even be able to brief a violinist in a rehearsal. But this knowledge base does not go very far in helping me to create beautiful music when I pick up a violin.

To an experienced music teacher in higher education, most of the above discussion is self-evident, and pedagogies that acknowledge it have long been established. Although instrumental *learning* can and does take place in many contexts, including private practice and ensemble work, most instrumental *teaching* takes place in a one-to-one environment, and the lesson plan is paced according to the student’s progression through pre-established learning outcomes. Both tutor and student have a common goal to *play the piece well*. In this regard, the conservatoire’s aims are closely aligned with the goals of the society it serves. Society needs orchestras and other ensembles in the Art-music tradition⁵, and there is a threshold of technical competency that a musician must meet in order to participate in these. The iterative and linear journey towards this threshold is commonly undertaken in music schools, and is ingrained in pedagogical practice. Most conservatoires and many universities also teach music (teacher) education, ensuring that pedagogical traditions are passed on to the next generation.

Recent music pedagogy has begun to wrestle with the way popular musicians acquire their requisite skills. Lucy Green’s influential book *How popular musicians learn* (2002) acknowledges that popular musicians acquire musical skills differently from classical musicians, using the respective terms ‘haphazard’ and ‘linear’ (Green, 2002, pp 207-9); Green is one of a small number of music education scholars who have discussed the role of songwriting in the curriculum.⁶ Andrew Hugill (2012) categorises musician types, and related curricular approaches, by music’s raw elements of pitch, rhythm and timbre, and

⁵ Some recent writers (Covach, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 2015; Freeman, 2014) have bemoaned the oversupply of classical music graduates to the professional orchestral workforce. I do not intend to dwell on this particular issue here, but the debate does have obvious implications for the future curricular balance between popular and classical musics in music schools generally. It also highlights the assumption that conservatoires’ primary *raison d’être* is to train graduates for employment as performers, despite this oversupply being so widely acknowledged.

⁶ See also (J. Bennett, 2015; Kratus, 2014; Randles, Clint, 2014)

broadly aligns these three with classical, popular and digital musicians respectively. Although he acknowledges that such distinctions have necessary levels of overlap, his core argument is that higher music education concentrates disproportionately upon pitch-based music skills and disproportionately under-develops learners in the ‘rhythmic’ (pop/rock) and ‘timbral’ (digital) categories (Hugill, 2012 pp.4-5).

What, then, should be the goals and aspirations of a popular music curriculum in higher education? To answer this question we might begin from the perspective of society’s requirement for musically proficient people, and work our way backwards from the music to identify the individuals who create it. Popular music, as famously argued by Adorno (1941), is a mass-market, commoditized product, designed and manufactured to appeal to a large number of people and, at least during the sheet music and phonographic eras of the twentieth century, built on a retail-based economic model, albeit with signs of erosion in the early twenty-first century due to the de-commoditization immanent in online digital distribution. Its market-driven, quasi-Darwinist existence requires neither subsidy nor preservation; it needs only an audience, without whom it cannot exist. Therefore, like the conservatoires before them, schools and departments of popular music need to teach skills that can supply the needs of the listeners their students intend to serve.

Making popular music

Popular music’s aural product manifests itself in one of two ways – as a sound recording, or as a performance. Each of these has, since the mid-twentieth century, been monetized differently for the consumer, respectively as a retail audio product (vinyl, cassette, CD) and as a live show. The sound recording can exist in a stand-alone format or can be combined with other media (e.g. film and TV or video games). Indeed, the world’s collection societies (e.g. the Performing Right Society in the UK, or ASCAP/BMI in the USA) have built entire administrative systems around the distinction between the performance of a work and the sound recording of that work. Both of these aural products are manifestations of creative teamwork (Jones, this volume). A sound recording may represent the work of songwriters, arrangers, programmers, performers, producers, digital audio workstation operators and mixing/mastering engineers. A live show may include all of the above (due to the common reliance on technological augmentation through sample triggering, backing tracks or live production editing), and has the additional requirement that performers need to be able to play and sing consistently well for the duration of an evening’s entertainment.

Allan Moore (2012, p.15) classifies popular music’s recorded artefact as a ‘track’ which consists of two elements – the ‘song’ and the ‘performance’. His definition aligns broadly with most of the world’s collection agencies, in that the composition and the recording are considered separate copyrights. In my ‘Track Imperatives’ (Bennett, 2015, p. 45) I have attempted to subcategorise Moore’s definition further in order to identify the core skills that recorded popular music production requires. These activities were identified through ethnographic work interviewing professional songwriters 2005-2013 (Bennett, 2014). The attributes themselves could be further sub-categorized, and for each analogue

and real-time manifestation of them there is a digital and/or non-linear equivalent (e.g. instrumental performance could be replaced by programming beats or notes).

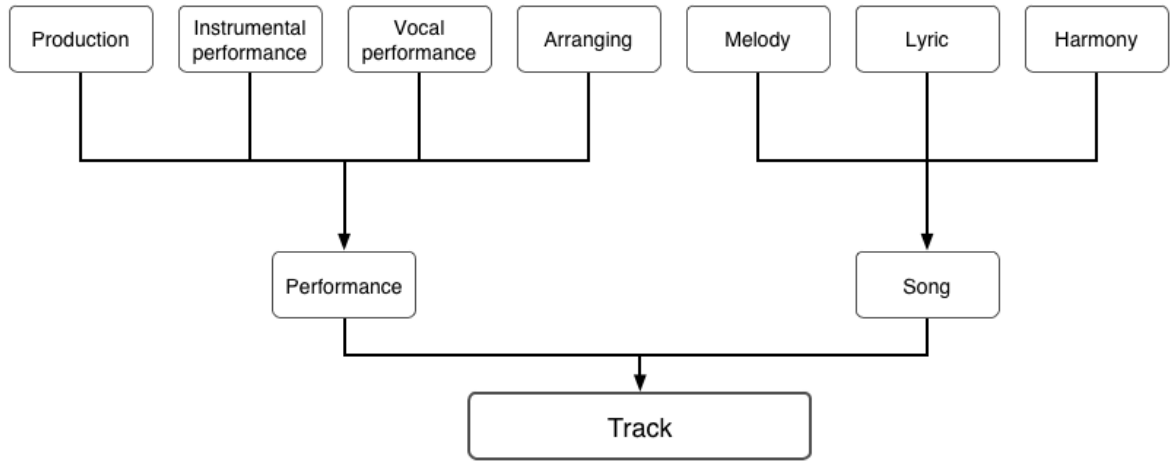


Figure 1 - Track Imperatives (Bennett, 2015, p. 45)

Instrumental or vocal performance skills, then, represent only a small part of the popular music production chain. This has been the case throughout the phonographic era. Carole King (2012) identifies the contributors to her 1967 hit “(You Make Me Feel Like a) Natural Woman”, citing (in addition to vocalist Aretha Franklin) a long list of arrangers, co-writers, session players, mix engineers and even the marketing department as the creative team behind the success of the work. Almost 50 years after King’s recording was released, German pop producer and songwriter Marc Mozart (2009) identifies very similar teamwork requirements for twenty-first century European. Interestingly, his list of requirements omits instrumental facility entirely:

Few people if any excel in all areas. A hit song requires a lot of specialized knowledge: melodies; a lyrical concept (and of course lyrics); chords; arrangement; production/sound design; vocal arranging; vocals (singing); vocal editing; mixing. Form partnerships where ... 2-4 people bring top quality in all these areas to the table.

It follows that a popular music education curriculum that focuses exclusively on the instrumentalist is unlikely to beget meaningful creative outcomes in terms of popular music’s product. At best it would generate session musicians who could succeed in particular roles in music performance, e.g. theatre pit or cruise ship band performance (Cashman, 2014), studio session work, covers bands or touring bands for existing artists. Many music graduates go on to become successful music teachers, but I suggest that the requisite pedagogical skillset is acquired additionally to the core musical learning developed through instrumentalism.

What is the role of instrumental technique in popular music education? An orchestral musician may be required to play anything that the session/concert requires, and this requires a sophisticated level of technique. By contrast, many of the top pop performers – that is, mainstream bands/artists who work on original material – may not need an advanced level of instrumental skill. The recording process does not necessarily require these due to the ubiquity of multi-tracking, multiple takes, non-linear editing and ‘comping’ tools⁷. There are of course sub-genres of popular music that require advanced instrumental skills and harmonic knowledge (prog rock, some heavy metal, and particularly jazz, which unsurprisingly was the first ‘popular’ genre to be embraced by conservatoires), but most popular music does not require virtuosity from its instrumentalists, although it almost always requires timbral or technical distinctiveness from the vocalist. At the time of writing (January 2015), none of the top 10 most popular iTunes downloads feature what might be called technically demanding instrumental performances – not least because some do not feature live instruments at all. The most downloaded song currently in the UK is Mark Ronson’s “Uptown Funk” (2014), which is heavily based upon a Dm7-G two-chord disco groove. Although it does include some live or quasi-live instruments (notably, percussively strummed electric guitar and a repeating 4-bar brass riff), performing these parts as a live band would not require particularly advanced instrumental technique (at least, in the way the term ‘technique’ would be used in a conservatoire). This is not to denigrate Ronson’s (or any other pop artist’s) work, but rather to observe that in popular music, songwriting, arrangement and production are as important as the ability to play an instrument. To design a popular music curriculum exclusively around iterative instrumental learning, then, would be unlikely to produce meaningful creative work in itself.

Returning to my track imperatives (Bennett, 2015), while it is clear that not only does popular music not always demand advanced instrumental technique, its production includes creative acts that do not require instrumental skills at all. How are these other ‘track imperatives’ learned? Can they be taught? I now consider a few of these creative contributions to popular music and discuss possible pedagogical approaches and challenges.

Songwriting

The traditional definition of a songwriter is someone who creates the melody, lyric and harmony in a song (McIntyre, 2001). Music industry administrative systems reward the songwriter separately from the performer, and copyright protects the song as a composition differently from the sound recording of the song, privileging melody above all other creative content (Demers, 2006). This pre-digital-age definition of the songwriting act is problematic for some contemporary popular music, given the other track imperatives, and considering

⁷ Compositing, or compiling. The term refers to the practice of performing multiple studio takes – most commonly of a vocal – and choosing the best parts of each to create a single superhuman performance with the best attributes selected. Comping has been common practice in recorded music since the common availability of multi-track recording from the 1960s, and computer-based digital audio recording makes it a simple matter to select any part of a performance and combine it with any other. For example, it is not uncommon to splice single syllables or even parts of syllables in a vocal take to achieve the desired result.

that most popular music is at least partly created using a computer. However, it is clear that the traditional melodic, harmonic and literary skills associated with mid-twentieth century songwriting are alive and well in the twenty-first century pop mainstream; from the 1990s to the 2010s producer-created computer-based music has coexisted easily with the music of bands and singer-songwriters who play live instruments. One of The Beatles' many innovations was arguably to steer the industrial model of pop creation, at least for bands, towards writing one's own material. Before 1962 it was commonplace for music publishers to provide songs for bands to record – indeed, music publisher Dick James persuaded George Martin to arrange the newly-signed Beatles to demo the Mitch Murray song 'How Do You Do It', although both Martin and the band successfully stood by their preference for the self-written song 'Please Please Me' (Davies, 2009, p. 258). The artist-as-songwriter model became, and remains, the music industry norm for 'authentic' bands and artists, and although present-day pop aimed at younger audiences often maintains the separate-songwriter production model, some artists whose songs are written by others may be incentivised to conceal this fact or find a way of ensuring a songwriting credit (J. Bennett, 2013).

Regardless of the extent of the overlap between songwriter and artist, arguments for including songwriting in a popular music curriculum may be as strong as the arguments for including instrumental lessons in a classical one, even though such inclusivity is still considered in many institutions to be 'subversive' (Kratz, 2014). Of course, not all working popular musicians make their living writing songs, but a significant number of bands and artists co-write material. There is an obvious incentive for portfolio career popular music graduates to have an awareness of music publishing, and to experience the creative and artistic rewards of writing original music.

Andrew Hugill argues that musicians who use digital tools are not necessarily digital musicians:

"Digital musicians" are [...] not defined by their use of technology alone. A classical pianist giving a recital on a digital piano is not really a digital musician, nor is a composer using a notation software package to write a string quartet. These are musicians using digital tools to facilitate an outcome that is not conceived in digital terms. (Hugill, 2012, p. 5)

I agree with his assertion, and it is something of a truism; digital tools augment many aspects of our lives but are not always used to create an inherently digital product. However, in the case of popular music, the product itself is partly digital, not only in its means of distribution and consumption but also in its means of production. Most twenty-first century popular music that we hear is impossible to produce without a computer. Even 'authentic' bands and artists who appear to market an uncontrived recorded product may benefit from an array of studio and production techniques. One of the paradoxes of rock music, for example, is that it is a recorded medium that purports, perhaps falsely, to document a performance medium authentically, and that bands therefore need producers in order to contrive this authenticity (Frith, 2012, pp. 207–208). It follows, equally paradoxically, that

an authentic contemporary rock band will need at least one member of their creative team with a mastery of digital production techniques.

Should digital production skills be ring-fenced to specialist ‘music production’ programmes? I suggest not; twenty-first century popular musicians have access to digital production tools that 20th century phonographic-era creators could only dream of, and these tools are becoming ever more affordable and usable (Bennett, 2010). Musicians frequently self-demo their own work, and sometimes fully self-produce the finished recording. It is difficult to argue that a hypothetical popular music curriculum that eschews digital music production skills is not hindering its students’ creative development.

Marketing and distribution

If the democratization of music production has allowed artists to self-produce to some extent, then the equivalent trend in marketing has created related autonomies in self-promotion. Since the early 2000s a band web presence has been a commercial necessity, and the rise of social media ensures that online communication with fans must be two-way (Dubber, 2012). An artist’s ‘creative team’, whether corporate or home-grown, will include those who can manage social media, and learning this skillset could reasonably be argued to be an important part of a popular music curriculum. The distribution online of promotional materials invokes creative questions about the materials themselves: Should artists undertake their own photography, shoot their own videos and design their own logos? If so, perhaps a crash course in camera-work and an academic study of semiotics is the order of the day.

The popular music industry has changed in the twenty-first century, to the extent that the retail-based economic model of the phonographic years, whereby fans bought a physical recording or a single-file download, is declining faster than streaming-based funding models are rising (Degusta, 2011). The recorded product, whether video or audio, is now perhaps nothing more than a loss-leading calling card for live shows (and their attendant merchandising). Consumers seem happy to pay ever-inflated concert ticket prices (Jones, 2010), whilst being disinclined to spend anything at all on a ‘purchased’ recording (Page, 2006). This does not mean that popular music students do not need to learn to make recordings, just that the recordings themselves – and the attendant royalties – may not be their primary source of income when they graduate. If live performance is so important, then, curriculum will need to include performance skills beyond those of simply playing an instrument; stagecraft will play a necessary part, because employable popular music graduates are likely to spend a significant amount of their work time performing live.

Popular Music Studies

If the conservatoires in the late twentieth century initially responded to the societal rise of popular music with indifference (Covach, 2015), some universities took a different approach. This is often euphemistically referred to as ‘Popular Music Studies’ (PMS), and it has its roots in sociology and cultural studies. PMS holds that popular music can be studied

as a social, cultural or economic phenomenon rather than an aural, creative or otherwise musicological one, and many current university popular music programmes and modules⁸ in the UK include considerable PMS-related content. Tagg (2006, p. 47) describes the two approaches as “conventional muso formalism (MUSIC AS MUSIC — the TEXT) and conventional social or cultural theory (EVERYTHING ABOUT MUSIC EXCEPT THE MUSIC — the CONTEXT)”. He notes a minority of musicians and musicologists (‘musos’) in PMS:

...conventional music studies deals a lot with the music as sonic text and only a little, if at all, with music as social practice and context; popular music studies, on the other hand, tends to deal much less with THE MUSIC and a lot with its social, cultural, economic and political ramifications. This difference between the two traditions of studying music relates to the simple fact that their institutional habitats are also different: while musicians and musicologists (musos) dominate classical music studies, they are a minority in popular music studies which is dominated by scholars from the humanities and social sciences (cult studs).

Many outstanding scholarly contributions have been made in both areas over the years, and the research community has often debated the tensions between the two approaches. Sociologists such as Frith and Toynbee are able to discuss popular music with barely a nod to musical or technical specifics; musicologists such as Moore, Everett and Tagg can provide sophisticated analyses of works and artists without the need to analyse their cultural environment. Tagg implies that the approaches have, in the past, been in opposition; recent research into popular music in higher education (Cloonan & Hulstedt, 2012; Parkinson & Smith, 2015) suggests that PMS has developed considerably and is moving away from (what Tagg argues to be) its exclusively cultural studies roots.

Returning to the idea of a creativity-focussed popular music curriculum, I suggest that PMS may not necessarily be the first port of call in providing a scholarly context to underpin the learning of students who wish to *make* popular music. A classical conservatoire might see the benefit of a musicology module inasmuch as it would inform the study of particular techniques, works or composers, but it would not necessarily expect its students to be better players or singers as a direct result of studying musicology. I am not arguing here for an entirely practical curriculum (and certainly not for an anti-intellectual one), but rather for a more holistic approach to contextual study. Musicology is one of the areas of knowledge-based learning that might support a popular musician’s creative skillset, but it is one among many. In addition to the aforementioned marketing and semiotics, improved musical creativity could be supported by study of acoustics (harmonic series, waveforms, dynamics, principles of synthesis etc) or poetry appreciation (imagery, rhythm, prosody, rhetoric, narrative).

⁸ Modules are sometimes called ‘units’ (UK) and ‘courses’ (US).

Recalling Marc Mozart's perspective as a popular music practitioner, his analyses of bass mixing in Meghan Trainor's "All About That Bass" and Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off" (Mozart, 2014a & b) discuss frequency curve, the significance of the 2nd harmonic, the application of high pass filters and perceptual loudness of the mix. The musicological content of each song is described in a single sentence by identifying the simple three-chord/four-bar loop on which it is based. The dynamic and timbral content of these tracks is arguably as significant a part of the listener's experience as their pitch-based content. So a popular music student aiming to create a recorded object would benefit equally, or perhaps more, from interpreting the timbral characteristics of a mix as from undertaking pitch-based chord analysis. This might be taught through expansion of popular musicology into more production-based research (which in the twenty-first century is beginning to happen through organizations such as the Art of Record Production and The Audio Engineering Society) or the inclusion of extra-musicological contextual learning in a popular music curriculum.

Transferable skills and employability

Implicit in classical conservatoires' curricula is an assumption that the curriculum's primary outcome is one of employment in music. Indeed, many such institutions (including my own, The Boston Conservatory in the USA) explicitly use the word 'training' to describe the student experience. Given the inescapable fact that many music graduates have successful careers outside music, and many of these speak proudly of the contribution their music degree made to their lives (*The Value of a Music Degree (video)*, 2015), it is clear that a music-only employability focus should not be the sole consideration in designing a music curriculum.

Higher education, even in specialist music institutions, can and should go beyond skills training for a specialist career. The idea that the student learning experience should engender transferable skills and self-development is established in institutional cultures, specified in national curricular frameworks (QAA, 2008) and much discussed in pedagogical research (Bridges, 1993; Hallam et al., 2012). Contemporary US conservatories often include substantial liberal arts provision to support their core performer-training curricula, although this is less common in the UK. Transferable skills can include teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking and the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility, and in recent decades have inevitably placed increased focus on digital, online and information literacy.

Defensible as the inclusion of a focus on transferable skills may be, it raises a dilemma for curriculum design in training-based music curricula because a balance must be struck between depth and breadth. If music-making skills are not explored sufficiently, the graduate risks being under-skilled and therefore under-employable in music. But if transferable skills are under-taught, the risk to graduates' future career prospects may be even greater, because such skills are by definition applicable to a variety of future life or career paths. Clearly, popular music curriculum designers have a moral responsibility to find this balance, and to consider the manifold career paths that a graduate may take within and beyond music.

Why ‘popular’ music education?

I have argued for a ‘reverse-engineered’ approach to curriculum design, working back from the musical product to identify its creators and therefore the requisite learning. This is not to say that we need to define ‘popular music’ purely as recorded mainstream pop product. If one interprets the term more broadly to mean any music that large numbers of people might engage with, then ‘popular music’ would include music for TV and film, advertisements, games and apps, websites, supermarket ‘muzak’, phone on-hold music, karaoke backing tracks, radio jingles, community choirs, folk clubs, music for dance and theatre (and musical theatre itself) and church music in all its forms. All of these are ‘real-world’ uses of music, and all are popular. Writing, recording and performing them requires advanced skills of artistic craft, and music graduates might find themselves commissioned to create any of them professionally, whether as a composer, performer, producer, MD, programmer or teacher.

When popular music is defined societally in this way – less by its musicological or aesthetic content than by its usage – the absurdity of any mono-cultural music curriculum, whether popular or classical, starts to become clear. Employable music graduates of the future may find themselves in any number of different, unpredictable musical (and extra-musical) situations in their professional lives. The broader their skillsets and the wider their personal listening canons, the better placed they will be to respond to whatever creative gigs might come their way. By this logic, perhaps what is needed is less a definition of popular music curricula in higher education, but a more holistic approach to all music degrees.

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