

Popular Music Studies in Australia: socio-musical activism and institutionalization

(Paper delivered at IASPM Aus-NZ conference, Melbourne Nov 2010)

*Popular music is a solution, a ritualised resistance, not to the problems of being young and poor and proletarian but to the problems of being an intellectual. And the paradox is that making pop music a site for the play of their fantasies and anxieties, intellectuals (and I think this process has a rather longer history than that of cultural studies) have enriched this site for everyone else too. Simon Frith "Popular Music" in Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler *Cultural Studies*, (1992: 179)*

In this paper I outline the first IASPM activities in Australia, from the 1980s through to the first academic-style conferences which were held in 1993-5. In this I would like to reflect on the ways in which popular music study has engaged with social activism. To invoke the title of the conference, this is to ask in what ways popular music study has been, and my continue to be, an instrument of change. This paper is to some degree inspired by an email thread which ran in the Australia-New Zealand IASPM list in 2008.¹ This was instigated by an inquiry for information about the formation of IASPM in Australia, and responses revealed that some correspondents in the thread were unaware or somewhat dismissive of this period of activity which I will describe. In part, this paper is a response to this discussion, but it is not limited to the documentation of a minor institution, or merely a contribution towards a completist organisational history. Rather it might provide one vantage point for an overview of the intellectual politics of popular music study and its historical development over the past three or four decades. I want to reflect on the shifts within the ideas which drove those who were involved in the first manifestations of popular music studies in Australia, and to place these in the context of significant intellectual, social and political contexts of the time.

¹ This thread was initiated by Jon Stratton on iaspm-anz@yahogroups.com "Quick query" May 31, 2008, and stimulated about 20 responses from Bruce Johnson, Tony Mitchell, Aline Scott-Maxwell, Liz Guiffre, Jon Fitzgerald and Geoff King. During the period my list access was not functioning, and I only received notice of it some time later.,

Australian activities in this field are one small part of the historical development of popular music studies as academic discipline, a development that can be traced to branches of sociology, from the Frankfurt as well as the Chicago school, from Ethnomusicology, from British cultural studies, western Marxist theories of culture, from the rise of post-structuralism, and from communications and media theory. Popular music study entered Universities in Gotenborg, Sweden, in Berklee Boston, and other tertiary education sites in the 1970s. It penetrated more institutions in the US and Britain in the late 1980s, and found a home in a number of Australian tertiary institutions through the 1990s, a development which follows on from the period discussed in this paper (Fitzgerald 2007).

Durable journals such as *Popular Music and Society*, *Popular Music*, Australia and Pacific centred *Perfect Beat*, were established from the early 1970s to 1990s. A number of influential publications were issued in the 1970s which were important in stimulating much of this early activity; amongst these John Shepherd et al's *Whose Music*, books and articles from Dick Hebdige and others from CCCS, and the books coming out of the Popular Music courses at the Open University inspired many emerging scholars (Tagg 1998, Shepherd et al 1977, Hebdige 1979). IASPM was formed in 1981 and it is clear this was the most important event in the development of Popular Music studies.

Amongst the individuals involved in starting IASPM, those who drove its early inspiration and principles were Phillip Tagg – and expat Brit living and working in pop music education and musicology in Sweden, with David Horn, and Richard Middleton – the latter closely linked to the cultural studies movement of Britain of the late 1970s (Cloonan 2005). A conference on popular music was held in Amsterdam in 1981 – and it had brought together over 100 participants from 20 countries. From the inspiration on the conference, came the idea of a permanent organisation, and Tagg and Horn had the enthusiastic energy to start setting this up.

The organisation in its early promotional material used a classical tricolon to outline its goals:

it was to be :

*An international organisation

*An interprofessional organisation

*An interdisciplinary organisation,

Its recruitment leaflet added “in short, IASPM is an organisation for activists – whether their activities involve producing or consuming music, studying or teaching it, administering or using it” (IASPM promotional leaflet, c 1980s)

It's not hard to see the style and rhetoric of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s here, with some of the commitment to radical social action of this period redirected into what scholars such as Stuart Hall and others from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the so-called Birmingham school referred to as “the cultural turn” (Webster 2004). IASPM aimed to be truly international, and it sought to avoid some of the pitfalls which its founders saw within conservative intellectual organisations. In particular it wanted to avoid a trans-Atlantic American/British domination, and here the strong involvement of Dutch, German, Scandinavian and other European scholars was seminal. But even a European/American axis of domination was seen as a threat to a true internationalisation. It was thus very conscious of making possible participation from third world scholars. During the early 1980s, the first Dutch conference was followed up by a series of conferences in Italy, Montreal, and then, idealistically, in Ghana. Finally, in this period there was nearly a conference in the Philippines, but plans were derailed by the local population being more interested in getting rid of President Marcos than smoothing the way for an academic conference.

The *interprofessional* resolve implied that the potential interest in the study of popular music and the organisation would come from more than academics – journalists, musicians, fans etc should all be able to contribute. The interdisciplinarity built upon the confluence of a humanist Marxism criticism, inspired by a politicised post-Leavisite, post-structuralist Film and Media studies, institutional and cultural sociology and a move towards ethnographic methods instigated by cultural studies. To this was added musicology, a discipline which while in general reluctant to include popular music within its institutions, was beginning to question its own stultifying conservatism (Laing 1994, Kerman 1985).

How did this enthusiasm and activity first reach Australia? In Australia the first local branch of IASPM was formed in 1984. The first members combined

musical and cultural activism, and while generally most of these were from somewhat outside academia, they were eager to enter the international networks of scholars which had been forming through the 1980s. Here I am going to write myself into the picture. I was doing a course in ethnomusicology at Monash University at the time – partly as building myself a career change from secondary teaching– but mainly to try to equip myself for writing about popular styles of music.

Margaret Kartomi, a prominent ethnomusicologist at Monash, had attended a musicology conference in Europe, and she was invited to a lecture tour of Sweden by the Swedish musicologist Jan Ling from University of Gotenborg. Kartomi had studied at Humboldt , and though well established in the field of Ethnomusicology as it had developed in the US in the 1960s, had remained close to the Eastern European scholars of comparative musicology from the institution of her postgraduate study . In Europe she met Ling's associate and ex-PhD student, Phillip Tagg and she returned to Australia with a copy of Tagg's thesis on the theme from the TV detective show Kojak, as well as some IASPM material. Being a compulsive joiner, I clipped the coupon and sent it off with my international money order, as did another of her students , John Betts .

About the same time some others in Melbourne had also come across the early IASPM recruitment material and done the same thing. Our applications, drew from the central administration not just membership confirmation, but a letter from John Shepherd, the international secretary. The letter informed us that there were 3 or 4 members in Australia, and urged us to form a national branch. This attentiveness was a consequence of the international strategy of the organisation, which envisaged a federal structure of national and regional branches.

So we made contact. First I met with Marcus Breen. Marcus at this stage was a journalist working his way up in the profession, starting in suburban newspapers and doing some rock reviewing, while putting together a collection of articles on Popular music in Australia. This appeared as *Missing in Action* (1987). Another local member was Jan Van Belle. Jan was a Dutch saxophone player, who had moved to Australia with his wife, a linguist who had taken up an academic appointment in the French Department at University of Melbourne. Jan was teaching saxophone to students at the private secondary school Methodist Ladies College, and he had come from the Dutch or Benelux

branch of IASPM, which in the afterglow of the first IASPM conference was a lively centres of early IASPM activity.

Each of the first members were aware of others interested in popular music study. One of these was Lawrie Zion, a postgraduate student in history at University of Melbourne , who was writing a thesis on the Australian pop scene in the 1960s, and later became a radio journalist with JJJ, and is now a lecturer in journalism at Latrobe University. Soon we were joined by a number of other ethnomusicology postgraduates from Monash including Aline Scott-Maxwell, active member and scholar ever since. Aline and I were at this time part of a group of postgraduates at Monash who were interested in the contemporary moves within Ethnomusicology to question its colonialist legacy, and to take on some of the directions of the new critical anthropology.

As postgraduate students, we and the other members had relatively slight institutional ties to the university system. However it was the very absence of any institutional interest in popular music studies which stimulated us to establish links with something we saw as an international movement. Within this we were keen to establish our local branch. The first meeting was held 15 August 1984. Those present included myself, Marcus Breen , Lawrie Zion, Jan van Belle, Mick Counihan from RMIT media studies, John Betts , Aline Scott-Maxwell and several others. We decided to start to organise activity-based monthly meetings, which included discussing current and potential research activities. Hoping to build some initial momentum and broaden the membership base, our second meeting was a public showing of a film made in 1966 *Approximately Panther* (a film by Peter Lamb and Doug Panther which featured interesting footage of contemporary popular music: including, I recall, footage of the Loved Ones) . This had been unearthed by Laurie Zion in his research, and we showed it at the State Film centre in Melbourne, and it drew a slightly larger group along, that we added to an expanding mailing list.²

Over the next year we had regular monthly meetings, usually in a private home. But we soon started to think of more public events, to stimulate discussion and action on popular music matters. For example, there were talks on Semiotics and Music, on Steel Drum Music, on popular music genres in Asia, on current Australian Broadcasting Tribunal research on young peoples' music, to list a

² The detail of these early meetings comes from correspondences and newsletters which I hold. Jan van Belle as the first secretary made relatively complete and formal reports of meetings, and these were diligently circulated.

few that were held over 1984-5. By the end of 1985 records show a paid membership of about 15. These members were contacted by regular newsletters, and we also distributed to a mailing list of about 50 that we were trying to inform and involve.

During 1985, Marcus Breen had joined an international research project on music videos with Jan Fairley and others. This was called the Warm Kiss project. He proposed an Australian involvement. In our national sector of the project we conducted some video impact research with teenagers and university students, and on the basis of this data, Marcus contributed to the panel on the project at the Montreal conference. He was also elected to the international executive at this conference.

The Warm Kiss project was idealistically organised within the high principles of internationalism of IASPM, to study the international reception patterns of music video. Groups of scholars in several centres aimed to collaborate in a relatively loosely conceived research project. The output of this international collaboration was possibly underwhelming, if you take note of the review of the session which appeared in the IASPM conference report in the IASPM international newsletter *RPM* (Winkler 1986:9), but for us the project was locally more important, as it served as a way of establishing contacts with the Performing Arts Museum in Melbourne. We held a number of public presentations at the Performing Arts museum over the next few years. The Warm Kiss project was the subject of a public forum on music video which was organised in conjunction with one of their exhibitions. In the mid 1980s music video was a lively fast developing field of creation and study, and the meeting at the Performing Arts Museum drew an audience of over 100, and included presentations from emergent, and subsequently prominent Australian music video and film directors such as Richard Lowenstein, Evan English and Ray Argall and others. It also stimulated a response from emergent postmodernist critic Phillip Brophy, who criticised what he identified as a simplistic empiricism in the content analysis and audience reception studies which were presented (Brophy 1986). The tenor of this critique reflects something of the local intellectual currents within which IASPM was forming. There was an energetic group of a postmodern avant-garde artists and commentators around the journal *Art and Text*, and with various musical and visual artists projects, particularly associated with the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre, and such post-punk and minimalist avant garde music projects such as tsk tsk tsk and

Essendon Airport. The IASPM group were closer to a conventional cultural-interventionist radicalism than the aestheticised politics of the postmodernists (Chesworth 2011) .

Probably the most important centre of our activity in the 1980s was the emergent relationships between popular music and government support. Our most vigorous activism was directed towards attempts to insert ourselves into the debates around the emerging policy and funding issues . These have to be situated within personal, intellectual and political climate of the era.

In the second half of the 1980s there were a number of new developments in the relationships between government funding of cultural forms and industries and cultural organisations. A massive expansion of direct government support for the arts had begun in the Whitlam government of 1973-5, which had continued through the Fraser government. While the centre of this was in the Australia Council, with its art-form boards, the expansion was echoed in state and local government initiatives. In the Australia Council cultural policy debate was dominated by controversies around the high level of support for the extremely expensive flagship companies, against other more innovative and broadly socially directed art forms which were seen as getting little support. Through the early years of the Hawke –Keating government the Australia Council was actually the site of many bureaucratically supported debates on the democratisation of culture, particularly through the Community Arts Board in its various manifestations (Blonski 1992,1994). Justifications of excellence and national significance were dominant within the tenor of government support for the arts and music, but this was challenged to some degree by The McLeay report, a Federal government report which took a relatively democratic populist perspective on funding for the arts, which was released in 1986 (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Expenditure 1986). For a period this opened up space to mainstream popular music for the sort of cultural politics which had emerged in the community arts boards, and in multicultural arts.

At the same time as the national significance of popular music was being raised within debates about cultural funding, the vigorous expansion of industry policy by Labor governments in the 1980s initiated another form of funding of popular music. At this time a disparate assortment of lobbyists from music businesses discursively became "the music industry" and powerful groups such as Mushroom records began to look for the sort of support that the "film industry" had been able to claim. The labour government in Victoria, from 1982 had

funded a number of youth based music initiative such as the Push, with policies driven by such young arts and community bureaucrats as Andy Funston, sympathetic to what was referred to at the time as the “little bands movement” centred around St Kilda. Funston was an early member of IASPM. Pete Steedman, left labour member in the Whitlam government, vigorously lobbied the department of foreign affairs and trade - a portfolio formed by a highly significant administrative amalgamation of the time - to consider Australian popular music as an export industry, and by 1986 his efforts had begun to bear fruit in the Austrade Export Development Strategy (see Breen 2001:passim, esp 84-5). The Victorian Rock Foundation was founded as part of the Victorian sesquicentennial . In line with the discursive moves defining popular music as an industry, came the development of vocational training in popular music . While most tertiary institutions had no place for popular music education vocationally and industrially based TAFE system instituted courses, and the McLeay report supported such training to produce efficient and productive music industry workers managers etc, instead of concentrating on artist training. AUSMUSIC was launched in 1989 and lasted through to the last phase of the Hawke Keating government.

Thus the nascent IASPMites looked for possibilities of intervening in these contemporary developments, although at the time the historical trajectory of these developments, and the relationship between non-state actors such as ourselves and bureaucracies was by no means clear.

We held a number of public meetings and fora around these issues. On April 1986 we held a public meeting on Broadcasting policy, with presentations from a representative from the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal and from Stephen Walker of 3 RRR, and their presentations were linked to discussing a couple of reports on broadcasting policy which had recently been released. In 1989, with the aid of a small grant from the Victorian ministry for the Arts, we ran a day-long public seminar series entitled “Canberra rocks while Melbourne rolls”, echoing the policy developments of the time. There were sessions on marketing and export, on industry training developments and on community music making initiatives.

With a slightly different pitch, in 1992 IASPM organised a day of music workshops in the newly developing Brunswick music festival . This had sessions on community music making, and one on song writing lead by singer Deborah Conway. This combination of popular music producers and public

debate on the significance of their activity exemplified the sort of interventions in the public sphere which we wanted to become involved in.

At the same time we were forming some relationships with tertiary institutions. Michael Hannon was another Australian member from outside Melbourne, who had joined independently of us, who began his academic career as a western art music musicologist, got involved playing and studying rock piano in the states, and was starting to teach popular music performance at Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education. He was in contact with ethnomusicologists at University of New England. Collectively they invited the Melbourne IASPMites to the first conference in popular music in Australia in 1987. This conference had papers ranging from the Beatles' Melbourne tour, to Fijian Popular Music, Irish accordion playing, Egyptian popular music and other music styles, genres and activities.

In 1988 a contact was made with the most conservative part of the musicological establishment, with the hosting of SIMS - Symposium of the International Musicological Society in Melbourne. This was organised out of Monash University, and with the help of Margaret Kartomi, I was able to propose a popular music section, albeit small, to the organising committee. It may well have been the first eruption of popular music into this august organisation. Eventually we got John Shepherd and Larry Grossberg out to the conference, and held two highly successful and very well attended sessions. However, the conference maintained throughout the enclosed feel of such professional gatherings, and it was relatively hard to get any public interest. I was shocked that such a large conference could pass almost entirely unnoticed in Melbourne. So we organised a public lecture evening at RMIT, organised with the help of members Geoff King and Mick Counihan, where Shepherd and Grossberg spoke to a large audience drawn from well beyond the academy. I wrote an article in the Age Monthly (Oct 1988) "Public not admitted" on the contrast between these two events (Smith 1988).

How did we see what we were doing? In general, outside of positions of any institutional education institution support, at this time, we had models of being able to act as "public intellectuals", a description which started to become current in Australia from mid 1980s, reinforced by Russell Jacoby's critique *The Last Intellectuals*. Perhaps, more ambitiously we saw ourselves Gramscian "organic intellectuals" (Jacoby 1987). The emerging public funding for cultural activities, as well as the establishment of a number of quasi government

organisations and peak bodies provided a centre to an imaginary public sphere in which we could operate. By 1986 Philip Tagg, still situating Popular Music Studies in a radical democratic education and cultural intervention, already saw it skating between the “two establishments” of the music industry and of tertiary educational institutions, and warned warily of the ways “careerism” in either sector could limit the critical capacity of Popular music studies (Tagg 1986:14-15).

The academic sphere in Australian Popular Music studies only really emerged from about 1990, in Sydney, with Phil Hayward in Macquarie University and Tony Mitchell in UTS joining, and they started to create a more university focussed structure for the organisation. Phil’s intervention in the field commenced with his move from film and media studies, and in his initiating popular music courses and eventually a focussed department of contemporary music studies at Macquarie. This was the foundation of his remarkable role in fostering popular music publications and *Perfect Beat*; much of which is outlined in his 15-year-on article in *Perfect Beat* (Haywood 2007).

In 1993 Tony Mitchell organised the first Australian conference of IASPM at UTS. At this the papers presented were not exactly as was described by Peter Doyle in an IASPM list email thread, where he “recalls” that “Bruce Johnson gave an edgy paper about Johnny O’Keefe, and “pulled a knife on some square who couldn’t dig the rebop”, and I, apparently “yodelled my entire paper standing on my head, and drinking a glass of water”. However his wild hyperbole does capture the level of excitement in the coming together. This conference brought forward a new dynamic of recruitment and involvement in popular music studies.

A smaller conference followed in 1994 in Lismore. At this the general meeting of the organisation moved that a committee be formed to advise on the restructuring of the organisation, reflecting its changing activities, membership and aims. In 1995, the Australian-NZ Branch of IASPM, organised the third conference in conjunction with the English department at Melbourne university. At the annual general meeting which was held at this conference the primary item on the agenda was a proposal drafted by the committee constituted from the Lismore conference for the reorganisation of the organisation. This called for a more formal organisational structure, including incorporation, and a six person executive committee to be elected by postal ballot of members. The debate which followed exposed a certain level of resentment at the implied

direction of the organisation. The minutes, compiled by Aline Scott-Maxwell as secretary of the Melbourne branch, record the debate in detail, and read now like a message in a bottle to posterity as the old IASPM is marooned, and the new one sails off into future sunshine. While the motion was passed, there was a mood of resentment and disquiet amongst some of the Melbourne members that the administrative changes indicated a move away from the activity centred organisation into one more suited to insertion into a potentially conservative organisational form. However, there was a great reserve of good will, and one newsletter of the next year reveals a tone of victor's regret, generously offered by the chairman Bruce Johnson. In a 1995 IASPM newsletter, referring to the departing committee, and I think, particularly, to the Melbourne faction, he wrote "We are conscious that we inherit momentum which they have generated, and hope to be able to maintain it in the future with their continuing good will and assistance"(Johnson 1995) .

In complying this account, which might form the basis of a deeper investigation into the prehistory of IASPM, I am aware of the personal nature of the insight; and in ordering the events of this past period, I don't want to appear to be savouring the melancholy too self-indulgently. There are a number of ways in which this commentary can move beyond anecdote, or even the limits of simple documentation and ask two questions. First, is this a description of a general institutionalisation of popular music studies which took place in this time, or are these events specifically Australian in their dynamic? Secondly, what sort of institutional and historical break is being witnessed here? The German classical sociologist Karl Mannheim in his article of 1923 "The problem with generations" outlined a theory of generations which revolved around the idea of the intersection of biography and historical social change. We might be able to speak of a generational change in IASPM, though the period is small, and the age differences insignificant. Mannheim described the intensification of generational definition as occurring in a "generation as actuality" in contrast to mere "generational location" . This former obtains when a group is "sucked into the vortex of social change" and participating in the "characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period" . Such a group of these might become a "generation unit" who find common ways to react to their historical circumstances (Mannheim 1952:303-4, Pilcher 1994). Though we are dealing with a handful of people, it is clear that a combination of organisational, political and personal confluences for a while created a unity. Perhaps the experiences of the 1990s, particularly around the Sydney branch, created

different ways of acting in concert. This initial study of the Melbourne group, will, I hope add to the narrative published in Hayward 2007, though there is more to be considered. The emergence of the New Zealand section should also be documented. However, looking back at the activities of IASPM Melbourne in the 1990s and early 1990s, it was imbued with a level of activism linked to its time. If we ask if the group seized Marx's eleventh thesis and changed the world, I think we can say no, but the world was changing under its feet and around it, and for a while it danced along with it.

References:

- Blonski, A. 1992. *Arts for a Multicultural Australia 1973–1991: An Account of Australia Council Policies*, Australia Council, Sydney,
- 1994. 'Persistent encounters: the Australia Council and multiculturalism', in *Culture, Difference and the Arts*, eds S. Gunew and F. Rizvi, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 192–206
- Breen, M. (ed) 1987 , *Missing in Action* , Verbal Graphics, Kensington, Vic.
- 2001, *Rock Dogs: Politics and the Australian Music Industry* Pluto Press, Melbourne
- Brophy , P. 1986 "Critical currencies : Negative views of Rock and Pop video clips" *Waves* 80
- Chesworth, D. "Essendon Airport" available at www.waxsm.com.au/chesworth/essendon.htm
- Cloonan, M. 2005 "What is Popular Music Studies? Some observations" *British Journal of Music Education* , 22/1, 77–93
- Doyle, P. 2010, "re: [iaspm-anz] First Aust/NZ conference, and possible Proceedings" email IASPM Aust-NZ list, 25/1/2010. Available at <http://launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/iaspm-anz/message/3444>
- Fitzgerald, J . "Tertiary popular music studies in the 21st century: Some perspectives from eastern Australia and eastern Canada " in *NACTMUS - Music in Australian Tertiary Institutions* accessed 25 May 2011, <http://www.nactmus.org.au/PDF/Fitzgerald.pdf>
- Frith, S. 1992 "Popular Music" in Larry Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London , 174-186
- Hayward, P. 2007, Mortal motivations: reflections on 15 years of Perfect Beat (1992-2007)', *Perfect Beat*, v 8 n 2: 3-13.
- Hebdige D. 1979 *Subculture: The meaning of style* . Methuen, London

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Expenditure (Leo McLeay, chair). 1986. *Patronage, Power and the Muse: Inquiry into Commonwealth Assistance to the Arts*. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Jacoby, R. 1987 *The Last Intellectuals*, Basic Books, New York

Johnson, B. "Chairpersons Report", IASPM Newsletter 10/9/95.

Kerman, J. 1985 *Contemplating music :challenges to musicology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Laing, D. 1994. 'Scrutiny to subcultures: notes on literary criticism and popular music', *Popular Music* 13/2, 179-90

Mannheim, K. 1952 [1923] "The Problem of Generations" in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London

Pilcher, J. 1994 "Mannheim's Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy" *The British Journal of Sociology*, V 45(n3), 481-495

Shepherd, J et al. 1977. *Whose Music : A sociology of Musical Languages* Transaction, London.

Smith, G , 1988. "Public not admitted" , *Age Monthly* (Oct 1988)

Tagg, P. 1998. "The Goteborg connection: lessons in the history and politics of popular music education and research" *Popular Music* v17 n2, 219-242

--- "Address on the State of the Organisation: Part II: IASPM Outlook" *Review of Popular Music* 9, 13-16

Webster , F. 2004 "Cultural studies and sociology at, and after, the closure of the Birmingham school" *Cultural Studies* v 18 n 6, 847 - 862

Winkler, P. 1986 , "The "warm kiss" video project" *Review of Popular Music* 9, 9