

Songs that resonate: the uses of popular music nostalgia

Arno van der Hoeven

This is a pre-print version of a chapter that has been published in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music History and Heritage*.

Please cite this chapter as:

Van der Hoeven, A. (2018). Songs that resonate: the uses of popular music nostalgia. In S. Baker, C. Strong, L. Istvandity, and Z. Cantillon (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music History and Heritage* (pp. 238-246). Abingdon: Routledge.

Abstract

This chapter explores the phenomenon of popular music nostalgia. In the cultural and heritage industries, nostalgia is widely used to make an affective connection to music consumers. Popular music nostalgia can be defined as a longing for the past that is evoked through popular music's production and consumption or representations of its history and heritage. This chapter theorises popular music nostalgia as a socially constructed phenomenon in order to understand its relevance to cultural industries and music audiences. To do so, it discusses the central themes that emerge from the growing body of research on popular music nostalgia. Echoing the more complex conceptualisations of nostalgia that have emerged over the years, both the positive and negative aspects of popular music nostalgia are considered. The chapter thus examines how nostalgic narratives are mobilised and interpreted by different actors such as music audiences and cultural industry workers. In so doing, it discusses studies from a diverse range of geographical settings. The sociological approach of this chapter demonstrates how popular music nostalgia is vital in forming a sense of belonging and identity.

Introduction

As a mass-mediated and commercial cultural form, popular music is inextricably intertwined with feelings of nostalgia. In the cultural and heritage industries, nostalgia is widely used to make an affective connection to music consumers. Nostalgic music exhibitions, revival concerts and classic rock radio stations all cater for ageing audiences and younger fans interested in music history. Indeed, music from the past calls forth memories and a nostalgic attachment to bygone eras. Popular music nostalgia will herein be understood as a longing for the past that is evoked through popular music's production and consumption or

representations of its history and heritage.

In this chapter, I seek to theorise popular music nostalgia as a socially constructed phenomenon in order to understand its relevance to cultural industries and music audiences. To do so, I will discuss the central themes that emerge from the growing body of research on popular music nostalgia. Addressing the socially constructed nature of nostalgia, I consider how nostalgic narratives are mobilised and interpreted by different actors such as music audiences and cultural industry workers. To explain the various meanings given to nostalgia, I will discuss studies from a diverse range of geographical settings.¹

My sociological approach demonstrates how popular music nostalgia is vital in forming a sense of belonging and identity. For example, music can express nostalgic attachments to national identities that are deemed to be lost in the present due to societal developments such as globalisation. It is often argued that nostalgic feelings arise when societies go through profound changes (Pickering and Keightley 2006). In the face of change, nostalgia can be a meaningful resource for people to maintain a sense of self-continuity between past and present (Sedikides *et al.* 2008). The study of popular music nostalgia thus stimulates what C. Wright Mills (2000 famously described as the sociological imagination: an understanding of the relationships between people's personal biographies, history and societies.

The chapter has been divided in three sections. Firstly, I discuss general literature on nostalgia in order to provide a theoretical background to my analysis. Secondly, I consider the production side of popular music, explaining how nostalgic narratives are disseminated by cultural industries. Thirdly, I discuss how music audiences interpret and give meaning to popular music nostalgia.

Theorising nostalgia

The term nostalgia was coined in the seventeenth century by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, who used it to describe the feelings of homesickness that, for example, soldiers felt when they were fighting abroad (Boym 2001). Interestingly, nostalgia was already linked to auditory stimuli in this original usage of the term. According to Boym (2001, p. 4), Scots

¹ Although I discuss work from different geographical settings, I limit my literature review to English language publications.

‘were known to succumb to incapacitating nostalgia when hearing the sound of the bagpipes – so much so, in fact, that their military superiors had to prohibit them from playing, singing or even whistling native tunes in a suggestive manner’. Over the years, this meaning of nostalgia began to change, as it came to signify temporal rather than spatial dislocation (Pickering and Keightley 2006). In his seminal work on the sociology of nostalgia, Davis (1979, p. 18) thus defined nostalgia as ‘a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward present or impending circumstance’.

This understanding of nostalgia as a longing for the past has evoked much critical commentary. Both in academic discussions and public debates, nostalgia is often perceived as a negative phenomenon. As various authors document (Tannock 1995, Pickering and Keightley 2006, Niemeyer 2014, Kalinina 2016) it has been associated with, among other things, a selective and rose-tinted understanding of the past, a trivialisation of history, sentimentality, a lack of creativity, and conservatism. Furthermore, analysts of the postmodern condition contend that nostalgic narratives offered by the media lead to stereotypical representations of the past and historical amnesia (Jameson 1998). Such critical perspectives helpfully highlight that nostalgia can involve overly optimistic perceptions of the past that hold back progress or trivialise history. However, although these approaches contain valid arguments about the negative aspects of nostalgia, they are too reductive for a comprehensive understanding of its sociocultural meanings (Tannock 1995).

Over the years, more positive approaches to nostalgia have emerged, highlighting how it enables people to draw meaningful connections between the past, present and future. Nostalgia thus provides continuity by keeping the past alive in the present (Sedikides *et al.* 2008). It can even be utopian when nostalgia draws upon the past to criticise current developments and to suggest alternatives for the future (Pickering and Keightley 2006). Of course, nostalgia is also valuable because it simply offers a pleasurable experience, such as when people encounter fragments from the past through the media.

Nostalgia can thus be seen as both negative and positive, involving multiple orientations towards the past. The importance of distinguishing different forms of nostalgia is underscored by the work of Boym (2001), who makes a distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. While restorative nostalgia aims to restore the past in the present, reflective nostalgia is a more ironic and distanced approach to nostalgia. Put differently, the first

category is about truth and actually reconstructing what is lost, whereas the second category is centred around the longing itself, recognising its own ambivalence about the past.

To study popular music nostalgia, it is vital to pay attention to these diverse meanings of nostalgia. Therefore, I consider narratives of popular music nostalgia as socially constructed representations of the past. To this end, I draw upon Garner's (2014) approach to nostalgia and television, which can also be applied to the field of popular music. He theorises nostalgia 'as a discursive form that is constructed according to the social, historical and ... institutional contexts where it is articulated' (Garner 2014, p. 407). To understand how nostalgic narratives are constructed and given meaning by people, we thus need to consider the sociocultural and institutional settings in which they arise. In this case, that setting is the cultural and heritage industries, where narratives of popular music nostalgia are produced and subsequently disseminated to audiences. Furthermore, my sociological approach implies that we need to make a distinction between processes of production and consumption in studying how nostalgia is discursively constructed. As Pickering and Keightley argue (2006, p. 925):

... we need to recognize the various ways in which people are involved in putting the situated past into some form of narrative order for themselves, or in critically negotiating mediated representations of the past for their relations to collective identities and experiences.

The meanings that nostalgia has for people cannot simply be deduced from the analysis of the mediated nostalgic narratives themselves. These narratives are actively given meaning by audiences, so we need to consider how people engage with nostalgia in their everyday lives. For example, the same nostalgic song can have different meanings for audiences from diverse backgrounds. Following on from this theoretical perspective, I will first discuss how nostalgia is represented through popular music and in the narratives disseminated by cultural and heritage industries. Subsequently, I separately consider the meanings of nostalgia for audiences.

Nostalgia in the cultural industries

In the field of popular music studies, the concept of nostalgia is often employed to understand the role of music in representing collective identities. Various studies have analysed how national identities are negotiated through nostalgic narratives in popular music (e.g. Rancier 2009, Wickström and Steinholt 2009, Buljubašić 2016). Artists can invoke a national heritage that is felt to be lost, missing or threatened in the present by using specific lyrics or symbols.

Rancier (2009, p. 388), for example, discusses three Kazakh music videos that draw on historical nostalgia to forge post-Soviet concepts of Kazakh national identity:

As Kazakhs have sought to reclaim the country culturally from Russification and to re-affirm their historical entitlement to the territory of Kazakhstan, they have frequently turned to historical symbols of Kazakh traditional culture, with which many have not had personal experience but which still carry considerable emotional power for even the most urban Kazakhs living in the cosmopolitan center of Almaty.

Rancier demonstrates how the music videos portray Kazakhs' nomadic heritage and traditional clothing and instruments, allowing contemporary Kazakhs to connect to their collective past.

Such connections between nostalgia and identity are generally studied along the lines of specific genres or music styles. Mann (2008), for example, discusses how country music's conservative longing for an America that 'once was' is constitutive of the genre's 'whiteness'. Addressing social experiences which are felt to be in decline in contemporary multicultural America, country's nostalgia is expressed through a celebration of social cohesion, small-scale community and tradition. In an altogether different geographical context, Wickström and Steinholt (2009) consider how the *Russkii Rok* genre (literally 'Russian rock') is part of a nostalgia for the glorious past of Russia. They describe this as a desire for a lost home, as Russia tries to define a new national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In lyrics and music videos, this desire is expressed through references to the Russian heritage (e.g. national figures and historic events). A final illustrative example of the relationship between nostalgia and specific genres is the case of Britpop (Cloonan 1997, Baxter-Moore 2006). As Cloonan argues, the sound of 1990s bands such as Blur and Oasis was nostalgic in how it echoed previous eras, most notably the music from the sixties. In that sense, Britpop bands rejected new musical and technological developments, as they refused to adopt the modern technologies that, for instance, the rave movement used. Cloonan (1997, p. 63) saw the nostalgia of these predominantly white and male Britpop bands as a reductive conception of English identity: 'Harking back to a previous era excludes not only those who cannot remember it, but also those who have arrived in the country since then'. Together, these different examples show how the sense of belonging negotiated through nostalgia constitutes social processes of inclusion and exclusion.

While the literature cited above mainly concerns nostalgia in the music itself, other authors

have investigated the role of cultural industry practices in the nostalgic framing of popular music history (Strong and Greig 2014, Tinker 2015). In this line of research, the focus is on how popular music's past is remembered through the products of the cultural industries. For example, the music of the 1960s has been heavily mythologised and commodified through documentaries, tribute bands, reunion tours, reissues, classic rock radio and magazines. This backward-looking orientation of the cultural industries has been criticised for inhibiting originality and creative innovation (Reynolds 2011). According to Weinstein (2014), it is the past rather than present which is privileged in contemporary understandings of rock music. Drawing upon Jameson's critical work on nostalgia in postmodernity, she describes this development as a form of neo-nostalgia in which representations of the past gradually lose their connection to the original events:

There was, indeed, an empirical past of rock, but it has been taken up in the present as mediated and then re-mediated to create, for example, the 1960s as a set of selective representations in which some artists, music, and events are highlighted and others eliminated. In that process of selection and simplification, nostalgia is aestheticized – it becomes a pose that can be felt intensely, but that does not connect the individual to an 'eternal tradition' or to a personal history, but to an image lacking insistency. (Weinstein 2014, p. 6)

Weinstein explains the emergence of this neo-nostalgia as the result of the commercial interests of the music industry and the generational identifications with the decade. For record labels, the nostalgic remembering of the 1960s is a profitable strategy for capitalising on their back catalogues and the past success of artists. In so doing, they target the ageing baby boomer generation who grew up with this music and later generations for whom this is a form of 'received nostalgia' (Bennett 2008). Indeed, younger music audiences without a lived experience of the 1960s also widely consider this rock's golden age.

Next to the music industries, the heritage industries contribute to the nostalgic remembering of popular music. As widely documented in the literature on popular music heritage, museums and archives increasingly exhibit and preserve popular music from the past (Roberts 2014). Museum curators often let these exhibitions resonate with the memories of visitors in order to evoke nostalgic responses (Leonard and Knifton 2015). However, as discussed in the previous section, nostalgia as a sentimental trigger has been criticised for being a romantic idealisation of the past. Addressing these critiques, a researcher and a curator involved in the Danish Museum of Rock Music (Mortensen and Madsen 2015, p.

251) argue for a reflective nostalgia that allows exhibiting ‘both the myth and reality of pop/rock culture’. As an example of this more reflective approach to nostalgia, they discuss how a museum could include empirical facts in exhibitions, providing a counterweight to myths about the past. This way, music heritage in museums can stimulate the mnemonic imagination of visitors, enabling people to draw connections between past and present. In any case, the authors do not want to entirely do away with nostalgia, because it is a useful affective trigger in music exhibitions. More specifically, they suggest that one of these triggers could be old devices such as jukeboxes, as the material experience of putting the needle on the vinyl allows people to revisit past times.

Indeed, other studies prove that exhibiting old technologies for music consumption is likely to evoke nostalgia. Since popular music relies on media and communication technologies for its distribution and consumption, these very media can constitute a form of ‘technostalgia’ (van Dijck 2006). As van Dijck explains, technologies and objects of recorded music are connected to memories of the time-periods in which they were used. She discusses the example of the transistor radio, which allowed young people in the 1960s to listen to music in their own private spaces. In that sense, these mobile transistor radios signify the freedom that young people acquired in that period. For this reason, such devices are often put on display in music exhibitions. Interestingly, van Dijck argues that new technologies enable the recreation of the style and audiovisual characteristics of older devices. Buljubašić (2016) provides examples of this in an analysis of nostalgic Croatian music videos, such as the simulation of old movie projectors, deliberately inserting the flaws of analogue technologies (e.g. signal interference and white stripes), and using black-and-white and sepia colours to signify old photos and videos. These stylistic effects trigger nostalgia, supporting the nostalgic narratives that music and heritage industries disseminate.

The audiences of popular music nostalgia

The literature discussed so far demonstrates how popular music nostalgia is used in the cultural industries. As this chapter conceptualises popular music nostalgia as a socially constructed phenomenon, we also need to consider the very meanings people give to these representations of the past. This is vital because the analysis of the cultural industries perspective in the previous section does not tell us how people appropriate nostalgic narratives in their everyday lives. Rather than simply dismissing commercial memory products of the cultural industries as ‘inauthentic’, it is important to actually assess what they

mean to audiences (Strong and Greig 2014, p. 10). Therefore, I will now discuss dominant themes in studies that have specifically focused on the various audiences and consumers of nostalgia.

Members of subcultures are a specific audience segment for which nostalgia can play an important role in their everyday lives. In an ethnographic study of nostalgia in the contemporary rockabilly scene in the United States, Kattari (2014) finds that participants in this subculture identify with the rebellious styles of the 1950s because of their unease with contemporary hegemonic values. She argues, for example, that the rockabilly style of clothing allows women to subvert non-realistic mediated portrayals of the ideal body type (i.e. being thin). According to Kattari, 'rockabilly women identify with the sexual confidence and alternative body images that they associate with pin-up models and burlesque dancers' (Kattari 2014, p. 186). The provocative ways in which the original pin-up models broke with the traditional norms of their time thus provides inspiration in the present. This example underscores how the seemingly reactionary nostalgia of the rockabilly subculture actually enables the progressive challenging of contemporary societal values.

Furthermore, the case of rockabilly demonstrates how nostalgia constitutes the collective identities of subcultures. The selective appropriation of fashions and products from the 1950s (e.g. pin-up fashion and vintage cars) gives the contemporary rockabillies a distinctive style, deliberately setting themselves apart from mainstream society. Tellingly, Kattari conducted her research at the Lonestar Rod and Custom Round-up, a car show and music event. Collective events such as festivals and concerts ensure that these subcultural identities are maintained over time. Similarly, in my own work on dance music (Van der Hoeven 2014) I found that nostalgic dance parties are places where subcultural identities are celebrated and passed on to younger generations. At what I defined as early-parties, DJs and music audiences return to the roots of particular genres. As the study demonstrates for the genre of hardcore (i.e. 'gabber house'), these early-parties are used to preserve what the members of this subculture deem to be the 'original sound'. Here they nostalgically cherish the hardcore music from the early 1990s, instead of the more commercial happy hardcore tracks that later hit the charts. Such parties thus keep the heritage of this subculture alive in the present.

Another line of inquiry in the field of audience studies focuses on how nostalgia emerges in the lives of ageing participants in music scenes and subcultures. Older music fans might feel

a nostalgic attachment to the genres that they grew up with in their younger years. This includes nostalgic feelings following on from changes in a music scene (e.g. ‘raves used to be more close-knit’) and changes in people’s personal lives, as subcultural activities give way to new commitments of work and family life (Wu 2010, Van der Hoeven 2014). Although nostalgia for once new and forward-looking genres such as house and punk is often derided, it seems inevitable that members of a subculture start looking back at a certain age. Adams (2008, p. 484) interprets this as a longing for a period in one’s life when there was yet no place for nostalgia:

Nostalgia for subcultural activity, then, might be interpreted as nostalgia for a lack of nostalgia: a nostalgia for youthfulness. Thus, even attempts to recapture and recreate the glories of subcultures past (such as performances by reformed punk bands and ‘Old Skool’ raves) may be considered as not entirely conservative and reactionary cultural events, but attempts to recapture a little ‘magic’ in otherwise mundane (adult) lives.

Indeed, research shows that the music taste developed during people’s adolescence and early adulthood remain relatively stable over the life course (Holbrook and Schindler 1989, Mulder *et al.* 2010). It is these formative years of experimentation and identity construction that generally evoke many happy memories. This does not mean that all older generations of fans nostalgically attempt to hold on to ‘the way things were back then’. Studying ageing punks, Bennett (2006, p. 230) finds that the fans who still feel attached to the genre celebrate punk’s longevity as a ‘living culture’, instead of lamenting musical and stylistic developments.

Interestingly, young people can be just as nostalgic as ageing fans. Since popular music now connects different generations of fans, nostalgia is not only reserved to people who grew up with a particular style. Many young people demonstrate a ‘received nostalgia’ (Bennett 2008) for a golden age of rock music which they deem more authentic than contemporary music genres. Furthermore, the concept of nostalgia has been employed to understand why some youth, who were born after the decline of vinyl, are eager to dust off the record players of their grandparents. Hayes (2006, p. 51) argues that these youth turn to vinyl in an attempt to resist the music industry’s preoccupation with profit-seeking:

Many of [the teenage music fans] complained that the contemporary music landscape was populated by untalented performers and profit-hungry executives interested only in producing material for ‘tween’ and even younger audiences. They lamented the passing of (what they commonly perceived as) a golden age of recorded music: a time

when artists released albums containing important statements, unfettered by the interference of record labels.

Although these youth might nostalgically underestimate how commercial the music industries already were in the 1960s, Hayes finds that these listening-practices do allow them to construct a meaningful musical experience. However, in another audience-study informatively entitled ‘not every vinyl retromaniac is a nostalgic’, it is found that the current use of vinyl is also associated with technostalgia for an older medium, the distinctive sound of vinyl, its sensory appeal and the aura attributed to a medium that has become relatively uncommon (Lepa and Tritakis 2016).

Finally, another meaning of popular music nostalgia can be found in the case of displaced communities. For migrants, music can express the longing for a homeland that has been left behind. For example, Shiau (2009) concludes on the basis of an audience study that the music of singer Teresa Teng (1953–1995) serves as an emotional anchor for the Chinese diaspora in the United States of America. This underscores once more how popular music plays a vital role in developing a sense of identity under challenging social conditions. In so doing, popular music nostalgia enables a meaningful engagement with the memories of distant times and places.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter has been to theorise popular music nostalgia as socially constructed in order to understand what this phenomenon means to cultural industries and music audiences. Following on from this perspective, the chapter considered how different actors construct nostalgic narratives in specific social and institutional settings. Furthermore, this perspective underscored that both the uses of popular music nostalgia in the cultural industries and the meanings given by audiences require empirical scrutiny. The meanings of popular music nostalgia for audiences cannot simply be inferred from an analysis of just the music or nostalgic cultural products.

In the research on the ways in which popular music nostalgia is mobilised in the cultural industries, three dominant themes and associated groups of actors emerge. First, musicians and producers invoke nostalgia in their works in order to represent collective identities. Through lyrics and music videos, national identities that are felt to be threatened can be nostalgically reasserted. Second, cultural industries use nostalgia as a means of

commodifying and framing popular music's past through all sorts of memory products. Drawing on a postmodern perspective, this has led some critics to argue that the cultural industries seem to be locked in their own past (Reynolds 2011, Guesdon and Le Guern 2014). In other words, the backward-looking orientation might come at the expense of musical innovation. Third, the heritage industries preserve and exhibit popular music history, often by using a nostalgic frame. This popular music heritage does not only include the music itself, but also a 'technostalgia' for its associated technologies such as transistor radios and vinyl (van Dijck 2006).

The research on the audiences of popular music nostalgia documents how nostalgia is connected to autobiographical remembering. Music can evoke strong emotions such as nostalgia when it resonates with personal memories. The relationship between popular music and nostalgia thus allows people to draw meaningful connections between past and present phases in their lives. Focusing on the social dimensions of popular music nostalgia, various studies have been dedicated to specific audience segments such as subcultures, ageing music audiences, youth and migrants. Taken together, these studies show how nostalgia sustains personal and collective identities through memories of particular periods and places. Echoing the more complex conceptualisations of nostalgia that have emerged over the years, these studies consider both the positive and negative aspects of popular music nostalgia. Instead of an outright rejection of nostalgia, the actual meanings and relevance of this phenomenon are assessed in an open manner. These meanings include progressive uses of nostalgia, such as when the past is drawn upon to criticise the present. However, the case of popular music nostalgia also underscores Kalinina's (2016, p. 13) reminder that researchers should not forget how nostalgia, in its negative uses, can fuel nationalism and exclusion.

Future studies could further analyse the social construction of popular music nostalgia by supplementing it with a critical political economy approach. This theoretical perspective would make it possible to understand how the institutional practices of the cultural industries result in particular nostalgic products. Empirically, this would require data collected in the cultural industries, such as ethnographic observations and interviews with musicians and producers. It is vital to conduct such empirical studies in order to test conjectures about, for example, the alleged preoccupation with nostalgia in the contemporary cultural industries. Finally, the research on nostalgia could be extended to different genres and subcultures such as hip-hop. A comparison of genres might demonstrate to what extent nostalgia is an intrinsic

aspect of the life-cycle of subcultures. Just as emerging subcultures are not immune to the eventual mainstream appropriation by mass media, nostalgia might simply be a logical phase in their development. Future research can shed light on such continuities and changes in the engagement with popular music nostalgia. A fascination with the past has always existed (Niemeyer 2014), but nostalgia's manifestations are likely to follow the fashions of the ever-changing cultural landscape.

Notes

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