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The Pop Festival: History, Music, Media

Culture, ed. George McKay

## Introduction

George McKay

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*I'm going on down to Yasgur's farm  
I'm going to join in a rock 'n' roll band  
I'm going to camp out on the land  
I'm going to try and get my soul free.*

JONI MITCHELL, 'WOODSTOCK' (1970)

*Oh is this the way they say the future's meant to feel  
Or just 20,000 people standing in a field. ...  
In the middle of the night it feels alright  
But then tomorrow morning, oh then you come down.*

*What if you never come down?*

PULP, 'SORTED FOR ES AND WHIZZ' (1995)

What is it about, the pop festival? I went to my first as a teenager in England in the late 1970s – Reading Festival three years running, with a group of school friends on the train, half way across the country, carrying tents and sleeping bags, until I realized the music being offered there was becoming less interesting than the music I could see in my local punk club. But, even though I *have* 'come down' (in Jarvis Cocker of Pulp's phraseology), the festival, the impact of that musical mega event, has stayed with me. Those Reading Festivals must have been important, formative events for me – after all, I still have the original programmes, which I have stored and carried around with me from house to house, city to city, for almost forty years, most of my life (Figure 1). And since my first book two decades ago, I have returned regularly to the music festival and carnival as subject (including McKay 1996, 1998, 2000, 2005, 2011). What delights me (I hope, you too) about *this* book, this *collection*, is the range of critical perspectives, political

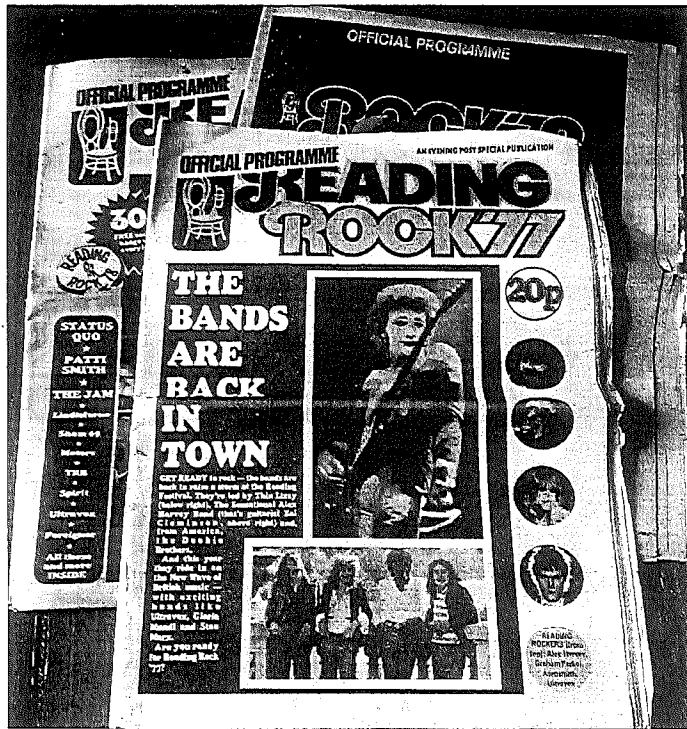


FIGURE 1 My back pages: Reading Festival programmes, 1977–79.

positions, practical experiences (some of our academic authors have also been festival organizers and artists) and international voices it contains. *The Pop Festival* presents a new narrative of popular music festival culture, shifting it back to a pre-1960s decade, focusing on the transatlantic and international dialogues and reworkings of festival practice, considering the role of mediation in the development and contemporary success of the festival, interrogating its politics and play. It does so by employing insights and theories from across disciplinary boundaries. In my view there is a fine set of ideas and readings here, which cumulatively extends knowledge and understanding of the field significantly. And there are pictures – in particular a photoessay by leading British festival activist and photographer, Alan Lodge, but also a generous set of images distributed through the text as a whole as a visual narrative providing example, context, understanding and enhancing the reader's pleasure of this (usually) pleasurable topic.

Popular music festivals are one of the strikingly successful and enduring features of seasonal popular culture consumption for young people and older generations of enthusiasts alike. Indeed, a dramatic rise in the number of music festivals in the United Kingdom and around the world has been evident as festivals become a pivotal economic driver in the popular music

industry, are a constituent of urban repertoires of regeneration, are a key feature in the seasonal cultural economy and are a collective ritual event for many groups of young people growing up. According to one recent British report, while 'industry experts ... speculate ... that the UK festival sector has hit saturation point ... the number of UK festivals still appears to be growing' (Brennan and Webster 2010, 25). Today's festivals range from the massive – such as Roskilde or Glastonbury Festival, Notting Hill Carnival or (until recently) Love Parade, Lollapalooza or Big Day Out – to the local, small-scale, community or the recently innovated 'boutique' events. You will recognize already in such a listing a certain definitional openness to the book: we are interested in popular music (including jazz) collective gatherings in a sort of special space-time, in a compressed or heightened experience of multiple performance and playfulness. As Chris Gibson and John Connell put it, 'Most festivals create ... a time and space of celebration, a site of convergence separate from everyday routines, experiences and meanings – ephemeral communities in place and time' (2012, 4). The pop or rock festival as outdoor site taken over for the weekend, with amplified live music on various stages, overnight camping, food and drink and toilet facilities, is the most familiar template (see Figure 2), and one we see several variations of in this collection, but the authors also want to extend and problematize some of that version, as well as explore its meanings.

Should we be surprised that the music festival, from (probably) jazzy origins in (probably) the late 1950s and 1960s, and with a heyday in the late 1960s and 1970s, is not only still with us, but is possibly more popular and prevalent than ever? When much of the rest of the music scenes of those times – a set of snapshots might feature, say, Afghan coats, hippie

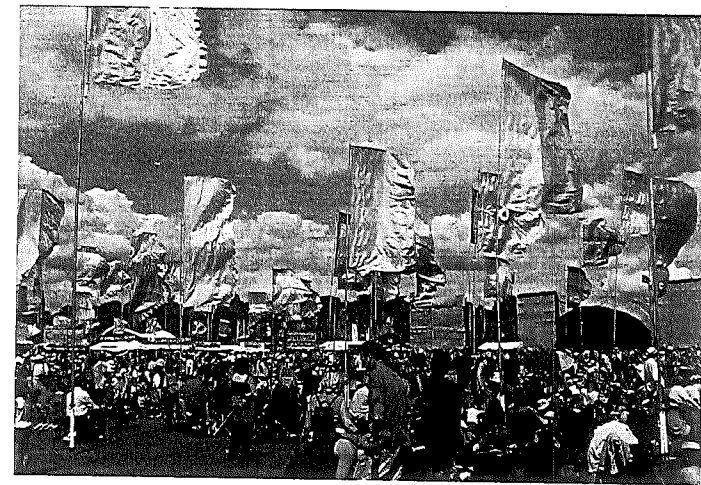


FIGURE 2 Festival flags catch and signal the open air and lift the vision: WOMAD Festival, Reading, 2003.

beats, vinyl LPs, 45 rpm singles, gatefold sleeves, groupies, long guitar solos, concept albums, speed psychosis, stylistically delineated subcultures, the rock supergroup, protest songs, gobbing, pogoing, 'hey maan', disco, the university or college gig circuit, headbanging, dancing round handbags – might be seen as quaint, or as at most present through nostalgic discourses of 'vintage' and 'retromania', the festival has not only survived in recognizable form, but also thrives. In *The Festivalization of Culture*, Bennett et al. offer an explanation.

In a world where notions of culture are becoming increasingly fragmented, the contemporary festival has developed in response to processes of cultural pluralization, mobility and globalization, while also communicating something meaningful about identity, community, locality and belonging. (Bennett et al. 2014, 1)

Popular music festivals have been around for well over half a century: festival communities are no longer exclusively youth oriented. For Bennett the festival can be both an intergenerational music event, young and old coming together, and one for ageing fans to affirm that 'their cultural investment is [still] shared by other members of their generation; it can also offer an opportunity to reengage with particular practices – late-night drinking, dancing, recreational drug use, and so on – which ... assume more cultural resonance when enacted as a collective practice' (2013, 89). The idea of the festival as 'a unique type of event' that is a 'playground for adults' (Stone 2009, 215) is confirmed by several essays here, notably Alice O'Grady's work on deep play and psytrance. Sometimes the 'militantly ludistic carnival rituals' Renate Lachmann writes of in his work on Mikhail Bakhtin and the carnivalesque (1988, 124) have another purpose. Woodstock (1969, USA), Glastonbury (since 1970, UK) and Nimbin (1973, Australia) are early event markers that point us to the utopian desire of the festival, to the way in which that temporary heightened space-time has the fundamental purpose of envisioning and crafting another, better world. Andrew Kerr, dreamer and maker of the legendary early free gathering of Britain's counterculture, the 1971 Glastonbury Fair, sought to explain to local people what he had in mind as an experiment that would take place on their green patch of England that summer:

It will be a fair in the medieval tradition, embodying the legends of the area, with music, dance, poetry, theatre lights and the opportunity for spontaneous entertainments. There will be no monetary profit – it will be free. ... The aims are ... : the conservation of our natural resources; a respect for nature and life; and a spiritual awakening. (Kerr 2011, 357)

In Australia, a couple of years later, Bill Metcalf was having his own experience of festival as energizing confirmation of possibility: 'By the end of

the Aquarius Festival [at Nimbin], we participants had learnt that we were not alone in our dreams and faltering social experimentations ... [Rather,] we were part of a new, utopian social movement' (Metcalf 2000, 3). Festival, for Kerr as for Metcalf, at its most utopian, is a pragmatic and fantastic space in which to dream and to try another world into being. Even the British government was prompted to recognize this for a time, in official actions and reports: a government-owned site (a disused airfield) was formally made available for the 1975 People's Free Festival (see UK Rock Festivals website), while the 1976 Working Group on Pop Festivals report made the case that

pop festivals – whether commercial or free – are a reasonable and acceptable form of recreation. ... Free festivals in particular are developing an interest in a number of activities – for example, theatre, folklore, mime, rural arts and crafts, alternative technology and experimental architecture. ... We think that festivals can offer useful experience to young people in living away ... from the facilities of modern society. (quoted in McKay 1996, 28)

You will see other versions of utopia in many of our essays – utopia celebrated, critiqued, glimpsed, denied, dreamt, nightmared.

In *The Land Without Music* Andrew Blake charted the post-1960s trajectory of carnivalesque politics, arguing that

festival can become a site for political activity. In their different ways the 1971 concert for Bangladesh organised by George Harrison, the 1985 Live Aid concert and subsequent phenomena such as the concert for Nelson Mandela, campaigning tours such as Rock Against Racism, the Anglo-Irish Fleadh held annually in North London and the gay, lesbian and bisexual celebration, Pride, all have built on the notion of a popular festival as a way of proposing, trying to create, a truly vital cultural politics. (Blake 1997, 191)

This book contains discussion of a campaigning political practice in festival (most directly in the essays from Graham St John, Andrew Dubber, McKay, as well as in Lodge's photoessay). Of course, social and cultural questions of race are also important (in some historical contexts, central) in discussions of festival and carnival, and in some historical and diasporan contexts – from New Orleans Mardi Gras to Rio Carnival to Notting Hill Carnival – they are central. Essays here by Gina Arnold and Anne Dvinge explore ways in which African American musical and cultural traditions have been at the heart of, as well as excluded from, festival practice. In a digital era the motivation for the social gathering of festival may be in part as compensation for the pervasive atomized and privatized experience of contemporary media and technology. But the mass political-cultural ritual of the carnivalesque protest should not be entirely reduced to being understood

as nostalgic or gestural, or simply a safety valve: it has a continuing irruptive energetic potential (McKay 2007). An archetypal 'protestival' (see St John's essay) is evident in the repertoire surrounding the G20 gathering in London in 2009, which included an instantaneous festival-style Climate Camp – activists were urged to 'bring a pop-up tent if you've got one, a sleeping bag', creating a green festival-style temporary landscape in the financial quarter of the city (Reyes 2009). Occupy movement gardens and squatted public city parks and squares of contemporary protest too have often resembled a festival landscape, drawn on festival culture, in celebratory confirmation of the demand for social alternatives.

It is important to acknowledge as well, though, that 'local social tensions may be refracted through festivals, as much as community is engendered' (Gibson and Connell 2011, xvi). Tensions are seen to be stark when local people leave their houses and businesses, even board up shop windows in anticipation of trouble and damage (festival as stormy weather), for the duration of a festival in their community. In the early days, the 1967 Fantasy Fair and Magic Mountain Music Festival in California 'was opposed by the legions of civic "decency" in the area, according to Jerry Hopkins (quoted in McKay 2000, 31). On the arrival of 20,000 festival-goers for the first Reading Festival in 1971, the local newspaper reported 'signs of an almost hysterical fear building up in the town as the fans stream in', and predicted 'mutual antagonism and resentment that will lead to trouble' (quoted in Murray 1979, 26). In a cost-benefit analysis of festivals, some of the costs include 'detriment to quality of life', 'noise and visual pollution', 'alienation of local residents' and 'potential for intercultural misunderstanding' (Gibson and Connell 2012, 22; see also McKay 2000, 29–47, for a discussion of festival and British law, and Helfrich 2010, for a discussion of community resistance to the organization of Woodstock in 1969). The post-festival clean-up operation can add its own negative legacy, especially since the rhetoric of rural festival in particular is often one of environmentalist idealism and green escape from the urban (see Figure 3). So the detritus-laden fields of, say, Woodstock or Stonehenge Free Festival – despite their back-to-the-land claims – showed that such 'early examples of "green" festivals lacked both the infrastructure and the practical competence to provide an ecologically sustainable environment' (Cummings et al. 2011, 13). Even at that most idealistic of Glastonburys, the 1971 free festival, intended as a celebration of our 'respect for nature', Andrew Kerr remembers soberly that 'the clean-up took a month' (Kerr 2011, 236). Also, festival garbage changes: in 2006 at Reading/Leeds twinned festivals, over 3,000 tents were abandoned by festival-goers, as environmentalism took a hit from disposability (Stone 2009, 221).

Of course, dirt, the body and personal hygiene at the festival form part of its narrative – whether that is Nine Inch Nails performing, caked in festival mud, at Woodstock 1994 or radical rockers, the Manic Street Preachers, importing a private toilet at Glastonbury 1999. More pragmatically, the



FIGURE 3 'Environmentalism idealism and green escape'? Glastonbury Festival 2010.

open-air weekend festival in a location with temporary infrastructure (the fields of a farm, for example) in particular is a case study in the problematic and pragmatic of waste management, including sewage. 'Excrement' is indeed, as Lachmann puts in, following Bakhtin, 'a carnival substance' (1988, 147). Micturation, evacuation and menstruation take on new experiential meaning at festival, as we build up to our regular trip to the smelly, leaky part of the site, where pleasure, play and performance may seem distant, interrupted or postponed: the festival toilets, whether longdrop or portakabin. Here, the corporeality of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque can be powerfully, pungently present. The acceptance of body dirt, of differing levels of personal hygiene at festival, of sweat, of the mosh pit as collective bodily practice, is a cluster of topics discussed in Joanna Cummings and Jacinta Herborn's essay.

How should we think about the place of the live music (usually, and even recorded music is presented 'live', by DJ or sound system), at the music festival?

'The line-up is everything,' says pop promoter Vince Power, playing as it does a critical role in determining prospective festival-goers' perceptions of each event, its reputation, and the markets to which it will appeal. ... At a big festival people can 'see' much of their entire record collection in one weekend. (Stone 2009, 211)

Yet other research, as well as festival experience, tells us that the music may in fact be of secondary concern: Bowen and Daniels (2005) ask 'Does the

music matter?' to those attending a festival (short answer: not necessarily), while Glastonbury 2015 sold out in less than one hour, when tickets went on sale in late 2014, eight months before the festival and with no confirmed headline acts (see also Gelder and Robinson 2009). In terms of festival culture more generally, music festivals (let alone popular music ones) may not even be the most prevalent type. Gibson and Connell's typology and analysis of Australian festivals in 2007 shows that less than 10 per cent of the almost 3,000 festivals included were music-oriented; agriculture (13 per cent), community (15 per cent) and sports festivals (36 per cent) were each a more common focus of activity (2012, 17). But within music festivals, Chris Stone has constructed a typology of contemporary festival practice in Britain that identifies seventeen varieties of pop festival (2009, 220). Of course, many of the essays in *The Pop Festival* discuss rock music as a popular form privileged at festivals, but several discuss other particular music genres: soul (Arnold), jazz (Dvinge, Goodall), folk (McKay), electronic dance music (St John, O'Grady, and Sean Nye and Ronald Hitzler). It is notable too that essays by Rebekka Kill and Roxy Robinson, and Lodge's photoessay, are about extra- and indeed the non-musical aspects of performance, festival content, alternative living; sometimes the music festival really is not about the music.

The mediated multiplatform nature of much popular music culture today is a given; for Chris Anderton et al., 'the music industries are experiencing a paradigmatic change in the early twenty-first century ... from the electric age to the digital age' (Anderton et al. 2013, 16). But even in contemporary processes of festivalization, the sounds and sites of which are often as compellingly non-digital as folk, acoustic jazz and green fields might suggest,

we need to recognize and explore the complex uses being made of various new media systems, both by event producers and by audiences, to enhance the audience experience of events. These include, among others, digital multi-channel television, ... large-screen public viewing operations, and video-streaming to fixed and mobile internet platforms. (Roche 2011, 137)

For Yvette Morey et al., the possibilities of digital media mean that festival's potential as 'interactive' space is enhanced and even extended beyond its normative temporality: through social media, the festival experience is anticipated, produced and (re)consumed (Morey et al. 2014). Arguably, the digital turn has had other impacts on festival culture. For instance, in a digital media world of musical practices and technologies like peer-to-peer sharing, downloading and streaming, the live music event has become ever more crucial in the economy of the popular music industry, and the festival is a core component of live music. Also, if we accept the idea of digital atomization or alienation, the desire for the intense experience of

face-to-face (musical/cultural) community that a festival can offer makes sense as a compensation for its lack in the everyday life of social media and the computer terminal. Yet let us not lose sight of history in our digital technophilia. While today it may indeed be media sponsorship and multiplatform live broadcast deals, widespread use of social media or the festival app, and side-stage or backdrop screen projections to experience the main bands, we should nonetheless ask whether festivals are more mediated or differently mediated nowadays. In the not so distant past there were daily newsheets produced onsite on Roneo duplicators, message boards as the prime means by which you could meet up with friends and sometimes Restricted Service Licence or pirate radio stations broadcasting over the festival territory. Further, as the essays by Mark Goodall, Nick Gebhardt and Arnold critically testify, films of festivals are at the heart of festival narrativization and mythologizing alike, while Lodge's photography presents a mediated historical moment of radical challenge in and through festival and traveller culture.

Chris Anderton explores in his essay here as well as elsewhere (Anderton 2009, 2011) ways in which contemporary music festivals are increasingly branded events with high levels of commercial involvement and relatively managed and regulated forms of consumption on offer. If this seems more marketplace than carnival, we should remember that the carnival or fair has always been a marketplace too, and indeed historically was often located in the town market square. Where some (older) idealists and researchers might see or seek a continuation of popular music and the festival's existential struggle between 'corporatization and the carnivalesque' (Laing 2004, 16), it appears that the presence of sponsorship and branding is generally accepted by today's festival-goers (Brennan and Webster 2010, 36). The economics of festival are also explored more widely – from the grassroots DIY organization in Dubber's essay to Dvinge's discussion of festival as a key item in the cultural repertoire of regeneration and urban cultural policy.

To conclude, Jonathan Harris challenges the utopian, environmentalist, romantic rhetoric of the 1960s and early 1970s counterculture – the appeal of going 'back to the garden' with Joni on 'Woodstock' – by reminding us that 'the garden was ... also already a "garden centre"' (2005, 15), that is, a place of and opportunity for commerce, exchange, transaction. This would make the festival's key figure not the 'child of god', dreaming another world, but The Man, turning a buck. And yet I feel here in the end that I am rather (would rather be) with Barbara Ehrenreich. 'Why not,' insists Ehrenreich in her urgent critical celebration of 'ecstatic ritual', *Dancing in the Streets* – contemporary manifestations of which for her include the 'rock rebellion' of the festival and the 'carnivalization of protest' – 'Why not reclaim our distinctively human heritage as creatures who can generate their own ecstatic pleasures out of music, color, feasting, and dance?' (2007, 260). As I hope the textual and visual contributions in *The Pop Festival* both capture and problematize, there is an 'irrepressible, unsilenceable energy issuing from



FIGURE 4 Latitude Festival entrance sign, 2014.

the carnival's alternative appeal' (Lachmann 1988, 125). After all, if we are lucky, and make it happen – a field, a big top, some sort of stage, or a street, a couple of clubs, some sort of parade vehicle – or can lay our hands on the right tickets, or be someone's + 1 (but we need + 8!), or can breach that stark symbol of the limits of utopia: the festival fence, *then* the festival is upon us, and we are it. Welcome (Figure 4). *Then*, for a while, all together, all together now, 'The sun machine is coming down, and we're gonna have a party. The sun machine is coming down, and we're gonna have a party' (Bowie 1969).

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## CHAPTER ONE

# 'The pose ... is a stance': Popular music and the cultural politics of festival in 1950s Britain

*George McKay*

*the pose held is a stance...*

THOM GUNN, 'ELVIS PRESLEY' (1957)

The aim of this chapter is to contribute to our understanding of the relation between popular music, festival and activism by focusing on a neglected but important area in festival history in Britain, what can arguably be seen as its originary decade, the 1950s. So I chart and interrogate the 1950s in Britain from the perspective of the rise of sociocultural experimentation in the contexts of youth, some of the 'new ... old' (Morgan 1998, 123) sonic landscapes of popular music, social practice and political engagement. I foreground the shifting cultures of the street, of public space, of this extraordinary period, when urgent and compelling questions of youth, race, colonialism and independence, migration, affluence were being posed to the accompaniment of new soundtracks, and to the new forms of dress and dance. Some of the more important popular culture events where these features manifested, performed and celebrated themselves produced what I see as a significant phenomenon: the youthful gathering of the festival, the surprising splash and clash of street culture (McKay 2007).