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The production of success:
an anti-musicology of the pop song*

by ANTOINE HENNION

At the heart of the frenetic activity of the record industry and of all the conflicting opinion to which this activity gives rise, lies a common goal: popular success. This also provides the key to the paradoxes one encounters when one studies the economic aspects of the record industry in France.† What does the achievement of success involve in actual fact? Economic, sociological and musicological analyses tend to evade this issue rather than explain it. Can the ability to achieve success be attributed to a more or less innate sixth sense? Does it reside in the superiority of the smaller producers over the larger ones? Is success achieved through bribery, through massive 'plugging', through a dulling of the senses or through conformism, as the ritual claims of the press would have it? Is it a by-product of profit, of standardisation, of alienation or of the prevailing ideology, as marxists argue? The sociology of mass media and culture explains it in an equally wide variety of ways – in terms of manipulation (see Adorno 1941), the meaninglessness of mass culture (see Ellul 1980, Hoggart 1957), symbolic exclusion (see Bourdieu 1979), the system of fashion (see Barthes 1967), desocialised ritual (see Baudrillard 1970), or as the cunning strategies of the dominated (see de Certeau 1974). I do not propose casually to invoke all the different theories only to dismiss them with moralistic claims that we must return to the basic facts. I only wish to point out the discrepancy which exists between the

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* This article is drawn from research which was the basis for a book, Hennion 1981; it is reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *Popular Music* (pp. 308–13 below). The research, carried out in collaboration with J. P. Vignolle, was originally the basis for an essay on the way music is produced (Hennion and Vignolle 1978A); it was also the basis for Vignolle 1980. 'Pop song' stands (throughout the article) for *chanson de variétés*, for which there is no exact English equivalent; translation is the more difficult because *variétés* is defined above all by a particular mode of production, discussed here, rather than by specific musical characteristics which may be compared with those of other genres (ed.)

† This study was the starting point for Hennion and Vignolle 1978B. The record market is indeed a strange one: the big producers keep the smaller ones going by relinquishing to them the most highly profitable sectors; high concentration is compatible with increasing instability; massive internationalism of capital goes hand in hand with the persistent predominance of French productions on the national market and with a surplus trade balance.

profusion of opinions expressed and the scarcity of empirical studies on the actual contents of so-called mass culture.

When one studies the professional milieu on the spot (as we did for three years, from 1977 to 1980), one learns that its fundamental task resides in *the permanent and organised quest for what holds meaning for the public*. Not an arbitrary or a coded meaning, nor a meaning imposed from above, any more than a meaning collected by statistical surveys or market research – these last can only reveal 'objective', that is, socio-political categories enabling the powers that be to label their 'subjects': age, sex, socio-professional group, preferences. The meaning in question is to be found 'down below', in those areas which carry the public's imagination, its secret desires and hidden passions – one could almost define such categories as *socio-sentimental*. They include key phrases, sounds, images, attitudes, gestures and signs, infra-linguistic categories which are all the more difficult to pin down insofar as they escape definition by the official language, and are not autonomous but inseparable from the social context within which a given group attributes a special significance to them. At the same time these infra-linguistic categories are ephemeral; as soon as language intervenes, they give up that terrain and re-form elsewhere. Slang, a form of dress, a hairstyle, a motorcycle and above all music, that music which 'means' nothing, are all the expressions of that which cannot be put into rational discourse – which is always the discourse of other people.

These meanings cannot be manufactured, cannot even be decoded. The professionals of the record industry have to feel them empathetically, to make them resonate, in order to be able to return them to the public. The distribution of roles and the organisation of work between producers, authors, musicians and technicians, as we have observed it, aims chiefly at preserving and developing artistic methods which act as veritable mediators of public taste, while accomplishing a production job which must also be technical, financial and commercial. Pop music has been able to systematise the very principle of its own diversity within an original mode of production. The *creative collective*, a team of professionals who simultaneously take over all aspects of a popular song's production, has replaced the individual creator who composed songs which others would then play, disseminate, defend or criticise. This team shares out the various roles which the single creator once conjoined: artistic personality, musical know-how, knowledge of the public and of the market, technical production and musical execution have become complementary specialisms and skills performed by different individuals. Thus the final product, consisting of highly disparate elements which can be considered individually and

as a mixture, is the fruit of a continuous exchange of views between the various members of the team; and the result is a fusion between musical objects and the needs of the public.

In accordance with the way our own research evolved, this article will roughly progress from the musical to the social; first, we sketch out a 'formal' analysis of the pop song in which it can be seen that a song's expressive value does not lie in its form and that a musicological assessment cannot explain why certain songs are successful and why most others fail. We will then try to trace the song back to its origins and analyse the role played by the producer* and his relationship with the singer; for it is the producer who has the task of introducing into the recording studio the ear of the public, whose verdict has little to do with technical considerations; it is he who must assess what effect the song will have on audiences at large. It is also he who must try to 'draw out' of the singer what the public wants; and conversely to pave the way for the special emotional ties which bind the singer to his public, by himself embodying for the singer an audience which is as yet only potential. It is for him that the singer will try to fashion the right persona. This work of the professionals, which makes possible the operation of a transfer-mechanism between singers and their audiences, goes against the grain of musicological analysis: there is here no such thing as the 'structure' of a song. None of the elements which go into its creation, none of the dichotomies which the outside observer can detect, are above the process of negotiation. Their meaning varies, wears out or vanishes. Each song modifies by degrees the basic model, which does not exist as an absolute. The gimmick of yesterday soon becomes the boring tactic of today, as far as public taste is concerned.

If one wishes to analyse pop music, one is always led back to real audiences, in the form of consumers; a pop song, which owes its ephemeral existence to the public in the first place, is only sustained by that which gave it its substance from the start. But this self-consumption of the public by the public is not without certain effects; what is stated does not take the form of self-contained, indefinite repetition, but is inscribed in the blank spaces within everyday life; it expresses what cannot be said any other way. Through the history of pop music, one can glimpse the history of those who have no words, just as feelings that cannot be expressed otherwise find their way into the music. This additional layer of meaning should, in fact, lead us to

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* *directeur artistique*, here and throughout the article, is translated by 'producer'; even though in France, the *directeur artistique*'s functions overlap those of the A & R man as well as those of the producer (as those roles are understood in Britain and the USA), 'producer' seems the nearest equivalent (ed.)

invert our approach: we ought not to attempt to explain the success of the music through sociology and social relations, but should instead look to the music for revelations about unknown aspects of society.

Pop songs analysed?

Pop songs do not write their own history; they do not have a ready-made place in history, nor do they make their own rules. Probably because of their immediate impact on the public through the mass market, they have no need to justify their existence; they exist in their own right, and their sales figures are the only claim to legitimacy they need. They do not have to shelter themselves from the public by invoking historical or aesthetic justifications.

There is no cause for complaint about this state of affairs, and no need to rationalise what, for once, no one has as yet attempted to transform into a coherent and positive doctrine. In fact, we ought to take the fullest advantage of this situation to analyse musical production in the act of coming into being; it is a kind of production which opens wide its doors, which is not in the least ashamed of its tricks, which does not dress up in robes of *a posteriori* orthodoxy, the constant heterodoxy of its operations; nor does anyone think of clothing its haphazard discoveries in the uniform of musical progress.

The rejection of a systematic reconstruction does not mean one has no objectives. But these must be identified. For if access to the process of creation is no longer obstructed by the accumulation of rationalisations, the facile assumptions that these bring to one's first glance are also absent. How can an observer assess the problems, order the more or less organised facts which are before him, do more than acknowledge the amazing efficiency of individual know-how, or register the uninterrupted succession of 'hits' or the isolated fluke? Must he give up the positivism of a constructed argument only to fall into the dangers of haphazard subjectivity?

I would like to proceed in the opposite direction, starting off with an empirical description of the pop song while remaining free to criticise subsequently any nascent positivism.

The raw materials

The music

A tune, lyrics and a singer: from the musical point of view, a vocal melody with an accompaniment. These elements make up a very limiting configuration as far as the genre is concerned. They exclude

the effects of vocal polyphony, as well as pure instrumental composition and its virtuosic possibilities. The music is subordinated in the song to a single main part: a sung melody of a simple type, which must have an accompaniment.

The tunes are tonal, rarely modal.* The principal harmonies are familiar; the form depends on the juxtaposition between an insistent chorus and verses which provide progression. But the simplicity of these traditional musical variables is misleading. The song is nothing before the 'arrangement', and its creation occurs not really at the moment of its composition but far more at the moment of orchestration, recording and sound mixing. The elements, with their somewhat classical musical grammar, are looked upon chiefly as raw materials to be assembled along with the voice, the sound, the 'colours' and the effects of volume and density. The real music of the song hides behind the melody and gives it its meaning. The audience only notices the melody and thinks it is the tune itself which it likes.

The lyrics

The pop song tells a story and comments on it in order to provoke in listeners the feelings appropriate to that song. At first glance, one can see that it is a genre which borrows from a wide variety of other genres; from poetry it borrows the importance and autonomy of certain key words, as well as the use of metre, verse and repetition†; from the lyric theatre it borrows the singer's direct appeal to his audience to share feelings expressed in the first person; but perhaps it owes most to the novelette in the way that it almost invariably tells a story, set out in a few words, concerning the relationship between two or three individuals. As one producer put it concisely, the pop song is 'a little three-minute novel', in which daydream and reality merge in a sort of fairy-tale of love or of anonymous ambitions.

A basic idea is set out, elaborated and concluded. It often reflects the eternal opposition between rich and poor, between strong and weak, between those who are lucky and those who are unlucky in love, etc. The story is conventional; in other words it is familiar to the casual listener and solidly anchored in popular mythology through the

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* The connotations of modal tunes are too intense; they can be employed only within a specific context where their evocative power creates the appropriate type of archaic, pastoral or ceremonious atmosphere. 'Le bal des Laze' by Michel Polnareff, in which the romanticism of a love punished by death is lamented in a medieval dungeon, is written in the aeolian mode.

† In 'Je l'aime à mourir', for example, a simple effect of repetition in echo at the end of the verse, finishing in 'ir', is enough for Francis Cabrel to achieve a most pleasurable effect in an otherwise extremely simple song (see Ex. 1).

intrigues and situations which that mythology holds dear. The vocabulary takes on a particular significance: it is the words which must give the text its originality while remaining simple and easy to memorise.

The character

The pop singer is not an instrumentalist who happens to have a vocal technique, an interpreter–musician at the service of a given work. He himself is part and parcel of the song which he sings, in the form of the 'character' he impersonates. The construction and publicising of this character are not solely a promotion job, separate from artistic creation; on the contrary, this work is central to the song, which is inconceivable outside the association between the lyrics, the music and the singer.

   The song can, from this point of view, be compared to the cinema; like the star in a popular movie, the singer must *be* the character who speaks in the first person in the song, and not just *act* the part. Instead of creating a role like the stage actor, who will play it far better if he is not taken in by that role, the singer has to become a character in whom are confused the singer's own life history and those life stories of which he sings. The producer is there to remind him of this; he makes sure that there is a link between the singer and his songs: the singer's stage personality emerges to the extent that the songs which suit him best, and in which he is best able to please, become clearly established.

The mixture

These three elements (music, lyrics, character) are conceived of as empirical mixtures based on know-how, as ephemeral alloys which cannot be codified. The song is the result of their articulation and is just as empirical and fugitive. As with a do-it-yourself kit, there are tricks of the trade in the creation of a song. But far from mechanising production, these retain the subjective relationship between the three elements: each appears to relegate the other two to the rank of effects destined to underline the third; but in actual fact, none of the three could stand on its own. The success of the song depends on its mobility: the limitations of the music (too repetitious), of the lyrics (too trite), of the character (too artificial), are each in turn displaced by the illusion that the other two elements are taking over when the third grows too thin. When the mixture is right, the ingredients enhance one another in a song which will go down well with audiences, though the observer and at first even the producer, would be hard put to analyse what is so successful about each element. But beyond a certain

threshold of credibility, the public, hell-bent on obtaining pleasure, is ready to forgive the banalities of a song which succeeds in providing it.

The techniques of the song

Musical form

Music is the fundamental ingredient in a song, giving it its form. In pop songs, the choice of tune usually precedes that of the lyrics, which will often be altered completely in the process of adapting the two elements to one another.

The construction of songs has become somewhat formalised. The various elements have technical names to which producers refer:

The introduction. In a few bars, this serves both as a signal to the listener, enabling him to recognise the song immediately, and as a foretaste, making him want to listen to the rest. The 'intro' reveals enough to suggest the mood: sound, rhythm, type, etc. It conceals enough to stimulate the appetite without blunting it. The object is to use fragments which characterise the rest of the song: a few bars of the tune, a chord, a mixture of timbres, a rhythmic pattern . . . In the words of an experienced producer:

The introduction is merely an aural signal which says: 'Watch it, fellows! Here comes such and such a tune!' As a matter of fact, a song is almost made by the introduction, which has *nothing* to do with the tune. It all depends on how smart the orchestration is: one must admit that, very often, it is the accompaniment which turns the song into a hit. I'm thinking of the song by Caradec, for example, 'La petite fille'. Jean Musy's clever orchestration, very light and very effective, played a big part.*

Or as one head of a large international firm put it:

They really understood the trick back in the heyday of English pop music in the sixties: 'The House of the Rising Sun', 'Satisfaction', 'A Whiter Shade of Pale', perhaps the biggest hits apart from those of the Beatles, all three made it on the strength of their introduction. You remember the guitar arpeggios of the Animals, the bass in 'Satisfaction', the Hammond organ in 'Whiter Shade of Pale' . . .

The alternation between verses and chorus. In the verses, which are in a fluid, recitative-like style, the music subordinates itself to the lyrics, so that the story can unfold. The chorus, on the other hand, is more musical and etches the tune in the memory, a tune whose regular

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* Most of the quotations in this article come from interviews with producers or other professionals in the record industry. More precise details of their sources are mentioned only when relevant.

repetition right through the song is expected and gives all the more pleasure because it is eagerly awaited during the somewhat dull verses. The arrangement underlines this opposition by enriching the chorus in a number of ways: the addition of instruments absent during the verses, denser harmonic progressions, the pointing up of a climax whose resolution makes one ready for the calm of the following verse.

As far as musical construction is concerned, a song typically opposes a harmonic *sequence* in the verse (with short, constant rhythmic values in the melody), and a marked harmonic *cadence* in the chorus (with contrasted rhythmic values in the melody: held notes, quaver patterns, etc.). But the opposition can also be achieved through a variety of means (see Exx. 1–4 for various verse–chorus constructions): modulation or allusion to closely related keys (e.g. the relative minor, see 'Je l'aime à mourir', or the subdominant, see 'Les élucubrations d'Antoine'); modulation by a third; opposition between minor and major modes (see 'Arthur'; also 'Neiges du Kilimandjaro' by Pascal Danel); use of pedals in the verse (see 'Capri, c'est fini', where throughout the verse chords with added sixths, fourths and ninths simply embellish a repeated oscillation of the bass between dominant and tonic); switching from compound to simple time (see 'Arthur' and 'Capri', the end of the chorus in both cases); or simply changing octave or instrumentation (as in 'Capri' where the octave leap is underlined by ascending strings and a fortissimo: this is also the principle of 'Aline' by Christophe, where the harmonies of the verse and the chorus are identical).

To find the right balance between the chorus and the verses is vital for the equilibrium (and the right perception) of a song:

I remember the number 'De toi' by Lenorman, one of his first songs to do well. The song was completed and I asked people to listen to it. It was a disaster! I was really surprised because I was almost sure that it was a good song. I went over the sound mixing ten times, but each time the result was the same. I couldn't understand it. And then, at one stage, I changed the construction of the song: it was the same song but differently constructed; the chorus, which came after a minute and a half of the song, we put right at the beginning. I played the song again to people I knew and everyone loved it! It was the same song, but they wouldn't even admit the fact! It's the little details which count! The success of a song depends on the accumulation of minor details. Sometimes the song is good, but it hasn't been thought out properly. Or else there's just one thing which doesn't work, and if you can find out what that one thing is, it changes everything.

Verse progression. Musically speaking, a song consists of alternating verses and chorus: the music of each verse being identical, it is up to the lyrics to build up progression through actions which interconnect.

Example 1. Francis Cabrel, 'Je l'aime à mourir'

Example 2. Antoine, 'Les élucubrations d'Antoine'

C   F

Ma   mère m'a dit An-toine, va t'faire cou-per les— ch'veux, Je lui ai
       ne les por - te pas pour me faire re - mar - quer,— ni parc'que

C   G7   C

dit   ma—   mère, ___ dans vingt ans si tu   veux. ___   Je
j'trouve ça — beau — mais parc'que ça   me — plaît. —

Refrain C7   F   C7   F   C7   F   C7   G7   C   Couplet

(Harmonica)   Oh   yeah!   etc

Example 3. Boris Vian, 'Arthur'

Ce   fut   un   for-fait par - fait, ___   un vrai for-fait bien

fait car on   est des ___   for - ti   ches,

le cli - ent é - tait fû - té, ___   a - lors on l'a bu -

-té   pour fau-cher ses___   po - ti   ches.

C'est Ar-thur qui fut char - gé ___   de se dé - bar - ras -

Ex 3. *cont*

- ser_____ de son ca - da - vre mo - che.

Mais Ar - thur a rap - pli - qué en mur - mu - rant: ça

clo - che, j'sais pas____ où il est pas - sé!

Refrain

Ar - thur,___ où t'as mis le corps? qu'on s'est é - cri - é -

- z'en chœur. Ar - thur,___ où t'as mis le corps?_____

—— Ç'a un' cer - taine im - por - tan - ce. etc.

Example 4. Hervé Vilard and Marcel Hurten, 'Capri, c'est finis'

Nous n'i - rons plus ja - mais où tu m'as dit je

t'ai - me Nous n'i - rons plus ja - mais Tu viens de dé - ci -

Ex 4. *cont*

It is 'in opposition', 'out of phase', with the music, insofar as musically the listener is eager to hear the chorus, during which the music 'explodes', while the lyrics induce a desire to hear subsequent verses, since they, not the chorus, tell the listener what happens next. But a good arrangement can also, in the background, build up different verses upon their identical tune, stressing musically the scenic progression which takes place. By varying the orchestration and the texture, the same tune will alternate from cheerfulness to sadness, from serenity to tension. In the same fashion, the chorus will be stressed to varying degrees as the song proceeds.

The conclusion. The last verse, which puts an end to the tension by proclaiming the conclusion of the action, leads up to the final chorus, whose ultimate function quite naturally issues from its repetitive character. Pop songs often end, anyway, by fading out the sound on a repeated 'loop': one cannot end a dream, 'full-stop', just like that. This moment is often underlined by means of a rise in key of a semitone

without any harmonic transition (see for example 'Capri, c'est fini', which refuses to come to an end).

Creating the music

The melody. Though listeners often believe that they pay explicit attention only to the melody and the words, the former does little to give musical ideas any form, preferring rather a kind of neutrality – except in cases where the melody itself is meant to evoke a particular style. The songs given in Examples 1–4 show that in general a single rhythmic and a single melodic design are enough to generate verses, which are then developed through harmonic sequence. Balance, malleability, simplicity: everything happens as though the visible surface element, the melody, and the underlying groundwork that gives it its affective dimension were complementary. In fact the melody is merely a neutral support which the listeners can memorise and reproduce easily, but which is not in itself of significance. A chance idea or two that catch the imagination suffice. From this fragile motif, the arrangement has to provide the musical value of the song, all the while remaining in the background. The final product revealed during the performance will superimpose both elements; the familiar form of the melody will be brightened up a thousandfold. The listener perceives the support and its illumination simultaneously. Later on, when he whistles the melody by itself, thinking it is that which gives him pleasure, little does he realise that it is in fact the accompaniment which, even though forgotten as such, gives intensity to the recollection of the melody. And this is all the more true because the process takes place unknown to the whistler, and because his imagination has a clear field in which to animate as it pleases the musical values submerged in his unconscious.

The rhythm section ('La Base'). As in jazz, this groups together all the non-sustaining instruments in order to lay down the tempo and the chord changes: bass, drums, keyboards and rhythm guitars. This kind of instrumental texture, based on the opposition between a rhythmic-harmonic pulsation and fairly autonomous melodic voices comes directly from the influence of jazz. But more generally speaking the same principle is found in most popular musical styles, both those which still function as dances (tangos, waltzes, etc.) and older ones which do not (minuet, branle, bourrée, gigue . . .). This manner of appealing directly to body movement, separating the beat and the melody in order to have them knock against each other – which swing music carried to an extreme – clearly sets these musical styles in

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opposition to the continuous and increasing integration of elements typical of classical music.

It is often said that the French were the kings of the bourrée; it is not true, because the bourrée has quite a complex rhythm of Greek origins that comes from ancient Occitania.* In fact, for us it is simply the branle! The French react to the tum, tum, tum . . . like that. Truly Breughel! You know, disco has become a success in France much quicker than in the USA. Cerrone, Village People, all that is by French producers. (An independent producer)

Without accepting this anthropomorphic interpretation at face value, one should nevertheless note that when speaking of this rhythmic–harmonic *'base'*, professionals insist on its animal, physical, primitive aspect. Its elements are described in physiological rather than musical terms. They are essentially concerned with finding a beat and a 'sound' that can evoke a visceral reaction, a blend that finds in the listener a fundamental, irresistible body resonance.

There is a *morphological* difference between the Anglo-Saxon and Latin inner ears. This can easily be felt, for example, in the way the Americans and the French mix the same song; in France we put in much more voice than in an American record. The inner ear has been conditioned by the music people have been hearing for generations. Between town and country it is much the same, the people are not sensitive to the same sounds. The ear reflects an entire social group, an entire country! (A young producer specialising in highly commercial songs, a former singer himself)

Orchestral 'backing' ('habillage'). This groups together the sustaining instruments, brass and strings, whose function is to draw counter-points between the melody and the rhythm sections, in order to tone down their opposition, which otherwise would be too sharp. Here, pop music diverges from the spirit of jazz, where this tension is developed to an extreme. 'Backing' does not exist at all in small jazz combos and is limited in full orchestras by the absence of strings and by a very rhythmic kind of writing for the brass sections. The fact that pop music is orchestrated does not bring the style any closer to that of classical music. True to the spirit of pop, the orchestration disguises the underlying construction of songs behind familiar appearances and brings together superimposed elements which underneath retain their separate functions, instead of stimulating their integration. It draws the ear towards decorative elements superfluous to the development of the song. It is as if the song were not meant to be consciously perceived, so that it might get through to the listener unawares.

While the *'base'* should be in a strict, consistent style so as not to detract from the rhythmic tread of the harmonies and the pungency of

* see footnote on p. 183 below.

the timbres, the 'backing' is, on the contrary, the favoured field for borrowing from other styles (especially from classical music), for tricks of arranging, for varied effects and combinations, through which the talented arranger constantly directs the attention here and there, only to slip away and attract it elsewhere. One of these effects in particular is so systematised it has been given a special name: the *gimmick*, a little dash of spice without any relation to the melody, a 'trick' that decorates the song and accentuates its individuality. It may be a rhythm, or a little instrumental solo, which keeps coming back, unnoticed as such, but which sticks in people's minds, bringing a smile whenever it crops up, and as a result making the whole song memorable. One example, almost too obvious to be considered the ideal gimmick, occurs in William Sheller's 'Oh! J' cours tout seul' (I'm running all alone), where a saxophone (unusually) insinuates brief solos between the phrases, its discreetly suave melismas comp-lementing the more rhythmic, single-chord style of the vocal.

It's the little thing; if you take all of Sheila's records you will see that it is used systematically. I've seen how Carrère did it: first, he took a very, very simple rhythm, and from the start he gave it a particular sound; then he added two effects in the middle of the song – what we call the gimmick in our jargon – which are just nice surprises, like a pretty ribbon around a package. These have nothing to do with the melody, they are two little effects that cross each other, meet each other, and which we are glad to hear each time. That's very important for a song. We find the song pretty, but it is pretty only because of this little effect. It is like sugar . . . But most of the time it is completely unconscious. (An experienced producer)

These 'fills', as they are also called, are not only decorative: they in fact fill in the *acoustic space*, making it more or less dense, clear, spacious. It is this which underlines the construction of the song; it is more important than the notes themselves or the passing harmonies, which are chosen from a very limited vocabulary. When the arranger tries to realise the wishes of the producer, he has to translate ideas of progression, of question, tension, mystery, opening, into musical techniques: choice of instruments and registers, range of tessitura, density of texture, doublings, sound clarity, articulations of the form by means of vocal harmonies in the background, or alternatively by having a solo line emerging in the foreground. This work on the volume and the grain of the acoustic space corresponds neither to com-position itself nor to orchestration, as these exist in classical music. It lies rather in between the two and is what carries the real 'musical ideas'.

The problem of the musical idea is the same one we find in more elaborate compositions, where it is to be found neither in an 'evoked' extrinsic commentary (little birds or wheat fields for Beethoven's

'Pastoral' Symphony, for example) nor in the 'objective' musical relations which analysis of the works is supposed to reveal: modulations, dissonances, resolutions, etc. The musical idea is actually the operation that associates the two, restoring meaning to musical objects, inexpressive in themselves, by means of unexpected usage. Such an understanding of musical meaning, which denies the autonomy of musical objects on the one hand, and that of the universe of feelings on the other, in order to unite within the musical signifier the two terms of pleasure – the subject and the law of the musical code – is, in general, infinitely more difficult (though much more convincing) than the inexpressive virtuosities of formal analysis, or arbitrary footnotes about the composer's emotional and philosophical universe ('eternity' in Mozart . . .). There cannot be any form or content until form and content are brought together in a musical figure, which was in fact what all musical formulas used to be before being integrated, with a univocal meaning, into musical grammar: think of the metaphorical scope of terms such as grace-notes, suspension, leading note, interrupted cadence, not to speak of rests.

This type of analysis is fertile but complex in classical, 'learned' music, where the integrated language abolishes isolated effects. Pop music, on the contrary, allows us in a way to see how musical association functions on a crude level, each 'idea', quite simple, being immediately 'realised' by the appropriate musical effect, while the musical grammar is developed elsewhere, in a silent and well-known mode, from which nobody expects anything. The same is true for the lyrics, which often present certain effects on the crudest level – for instance, rhyming of the type métro – boulot – dodo (subway – job – sleep, rhyming of 'o'). For extreme examples, see 'Animal, on est mal' (Animal, we're in bad shape) by Gerard Manset, or the vocabulary effects of Alain Souchon, in 'Allo, maman, bobo' (Hello, mummy, boo-boo).

From this point of view, pop music refuses solutions to formal problems cast in terms of the internal make-up of musical parameters, preferring to search for an empirical balance in the resulting sounds. Specific to modern pop, this kind of composition necessitates a varied and original competence, centred around the role of the arranger. White jazz orchestras of the 1920s and 30s, and Hollywood film music provide perhaps the only direct precursors of this new musical craft.

Creating the lyrics

The 'story'. The best way of characterising the 'idea' of a song (bearing in mind that here, more than anywhere, diversity and constant change

are the rule) would probably be to say that it must bridge the gap between current events and timeless myths. This is how one must interpret comments like 'It's always the same song, but with new clothing each time.' The story itself often tends to be timeless and mythic, especially as regards love, and it is the choice of words which brings in a contemporary perspective.

One producer of very popular songs asserts that 'Ever since people started making records it's always been the same song. It's a song of love, with situations that all sound alike, but with different words, and a different way of putting them together each time.' But that is not always true: a song like 'Allez les Verts!' ('Come on the Greens', referring to the green jerseys of Saint Etienne's football team), uses sport to give a contemporary slant to the expression of old-established, nationalist, communal feelings. The privileged theme is nonetheless the immemorial give-and-take between the pleasure and sorrow of love. Just for fun I counted those songs explicitly containing in their titles the words 'amour' (love), 'amoureux' (in love) or 'aimer' (to love), and their various translations and forms, among the 786 entries in the French hit-parade between April 1973 and October 1977. The result was 96 titles, or more than 12 per cent. There is, clearly, a thematic coherence among: 'Je t'aime' (I love you) by Johnny Halliday, 'Je t'aime, je t'aime' (I love you, I love you) by Joe Dassin, 'Mais je t'aime' (But I love you) by Marie Laforet, 'Comme je t'aime' (How I love you) by C. Michel, 'Je t'aime, tu vois?' (I love you, you see?) by Daniel Guichard, 'Et pourtant je t'aime' (And yet, I love you) by Santiana, 'Je t'aime à la folie' (I love you madly) by Serge Lama, 'Tu sais, je t'aime' (I love you, you know) by Shake, 'Mais, bon sang, je t'aime' (But, bloody hell, I love you) and 'Je t'aime un peu trop' (I love you a little too much) by Shuky and Aviva, 'Ne raccroche pas, je t'aime' (Don't hang up, I love you) by Karen Cheryl, 'Si tu savais combien je t'aime' (If you knew how much I love you) by Christian Adam, 'Tu m'appartiens et je t'aime' (You belong to me and I love you) by Christian Delagrange, or, in English, 'I love you because' by Michel Polnareff, or even 'De je t'aime en je t'aime' (From one I love you to another) by Christian Vidal. There were just as many entries for the other tenses, persons, and modes of the verb, 'to love', and even more for the word 'love' itself. If we include titles that are clearly related ('Toi et moi' (You and me) by Ringo, 'Fou de toi' (Crazy about you) by Kenji Sawada, 'Passionné-ment' (Passionately) by Daniel Gérard, 'Juste un petit baiser' (Just a little kiss) by Roméo, 'Viens te perdre dans mes bras' (Come and lose yourself in my arms) by Frédéric François, 'Un océan de caresses' (An ocean of caresses) by A. Sullivan, and a hundred others), but which fail to use the word 'love' directly, it becomes clear that pop songs are

above all love songs – even if it is only to say, with Eddy Mitchell, 'Je ne sais faire que l'amour' (The only thing I know how to do is make love), or to deny it, as in Daniel Guichard's 'Je viens pas te parler d'amour' (I haven't come to speak to you about love).

An encounter, then a separation, and so on ad infinitum. The stage is set, the action builds up until the shedding of a little tear 'which the public loves', things are in the end resolved by a small victory, a return to the status quo or by the hero recovering himself. It is not the intention of this article to go into the structural analysis of lyrics, as Propp has done for the folktale (Propp 1970), nor to extract hypothetical 'audiemes' analogous to Barthes's 'gustemes' for cooking (Barthes 1975). Nevertheless a quick analysis of a few typical situations brings out a major part of the 'ideas' in pop music. The underlying mythic themes are ambivalent, lending themselves equally well to submission or revolt, desire or hostility, according to the identifications and projections of the listener: nationalism versus exoticism – Michel Sardou, nostalgic for colonial France, cleverly blends the two in 'Le France' (the name of the liner) or in 'Le temps des colonies' (The colonial era), while to the very French 'Allez les Verts' is opposed the *Japonaiserie* of Kenji Sawada's 'Mon amour, je viens du bout du monde' (My love, I've come from the end of the earth). Notice all the English pseudonyms (Johnny Hallyday, Dick Rivers, Eddy Mitchell, Shake, Sheila B. Devotion, Plastic Bertrand) and the unpredictable, periodic success of songs with far-off and mysterious-sounding references: 'Les neiges de Kilimandjaro' (The snows of Kilimandjaro) by Pascal Danel, 'Capri, c'est fini' (Capri, it's all over) by Hervé Villard, 'Le sud' (The south) by Nino Ferrer, and 'L'été indien' (Indian summer) by Joe Dassin. We also find romantic longings side by side with a complacent acceptance of love's deceptions – ever since 'Chagrin d'amour' (Love's sorrow) or 'Ne me quitte pas' (Don't leave me) or 'Capri, c'est fini', the emotion surrounding a break-up has always appealed: Johnny Hallyday's 'A l'hôtel des coeurs brisés' (At broken heart hotel), 'Le téléphone pleure' (The telephone is crying) by Claude François, 'Adieu, sois heureuse' (Adieu, be happy) by A. Sullivan, 'Premier baiser, première larme' (First kiss, first tear) by J. Regane, etc. Alongside ambitions for money, power, success, one finds echoed the tranquillity of the hobo, pity for the 'down-and-outs', sympathy for the loser. Respect for the law and hatred for the police also get along very well together. This ambivalent attitude explains how different songs so easily change the position of the 'I' from positive to negative, varying the dominant emotion. But it is always on the dreams, the desire for revenge, the hatred and the resignation of the unwanted, the dominated (or, as Léo Ferré says, '*les pauvres gens*') that this centres.

This kind of content analysis leaves out the most important thing, namely, what is done with the content, both during the production and during the performance itself – and it is this which makes the difference. Suffice it to say that the story told is doubly familiar to the listening public: through the basic situation presented and through the contemporaneity of the people who play the roles. The story is to the lyrics what the melody is to the arrangement: it is to the story that listeners direct their attention, in order to put themselves in the place of the protagonist, the 'I', without noticing all the work it took to make that identification desirable and plausible for the listener, that is, the care given to the choice of words, to their relationship with the music and the characters, and to the contemporary detail. Conventional simplicity and ancient wisdom: that is the formula for the story.

The words. More than the story itself, which is quite simple, its only constraint being its plausibility vis-à-vis the singer, it is the wording that is the real problem for the composer and the producer. All their attention will be directed towards finding the right style and especially the right choice of words by successive (and often numerous) rewritings. The problem is that here again one must disguise one's intentions beneath familiar everyday language and construct the song as much outside the text as through it.

'The words must be simple and direct, but not clichés.' They must apply to current problems, to today's ambiance, to what people are talking about, without being worn out by use. One must somehow conform but in a hip way so that the power to stimulate people's imaginations has not been exhausted. Since the concern is less with developing a theme than with making allusions to it through particular expressions, the vocabulary soon becomes outdated, like current events in the daily papers.

'The moment when a record comes out is very important. In 1968,* for example, there was a period when it was absolutely ridiculous to put out a record; everything became irrelevant, outdated . . .' Lyric writing reminds one of a patchwork quilt, made up of quotations cut out individually, often quite out of context, from partially remembered memories whose immediate relevance to the text can be quite tenuous. (This kind of quotation can go back quite far: in one song, Dave sings 'Du côté de chez Swann' (the title of Proust's book).) When Eric Charden sings 'L'été s'ra chaud, l'été s'ra chaud, dans les tee-shirts, dans les maillots; l'été s'ra chaud, l'été s'ra chaud, d'la Côte d'Azur à Saint Malo!' (The summer will be hot, in teeshirts, in bathing suits, the

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* referring to the *évènements* of May 1968.

summer will be hot, from the Côte d'Azur to St Malo), the effect seems even to come from the very absence of any link between the song's contents and the slogan it evokes (a slogan of May 1968, when students demonstrated, singing 'Hot, hot, hot, the spring-time will be hot!'). Similarly, in 'Je l'aime à mourir' (I love her so much I could die) by Francis Cabrel, where we are told that 'She had to fight in all the wars of life . . . and to make love too', the end of the sentence seems to be there only to bring up the association war–love which people remember from the slogan 'Make love not war', but which has no relevance to the song (see Ex. 1). The word-quote is sometimes only an acknowledgement of current fashionable slang, as in, 'Tu me fais planer' (You send me) by Michel Delpech and 'Ça plane pour moi' (Things are really far out with me) by Plastic Bertrand, 'Je suis bidon' (I'm nothing special) by Alain Souchon, 'Mon vieux' (My old man) by Daniel Guichard, or even, for the older generation, 'Mes emmerdes' (My hassles) by Charles Aznavour. It can make a direct allusion to a topic of current interest: 'Pas besoin d'éducation sexuelle' (No need for sex education) by Julie Bataille, or even 'Le zizi' (nickname for the genitals) by Pierre Perret. But most often it is used to relay or echo certain social themes in a more general way. Thus, feminism gave new life to the word 'woman' which suddenly started appearing in the song titles of several female singers ('Ces femmes' (Those women) by Nicole Croisille, 'Une femme' (A woman) by Jeane Manson, 'Les femmes' (Women) by Sheila, 'Femme est la nuit' (Woman is night) by Dalida) and also in Nougaro's 'Femmes et famines' (Women and famines).

The meaning of words depends less on their organisation in the text than on the social context they evoke in absentia. 'There are no "trends" in pop music; it just *follows* the evolution of society', according to a producer who is involved with singers of quite different styles (Dave, Lenorman, Alain Chamfort . .). But pop also *expresses* this evolution of society, and in doing so is not so passive after all. Nevertheless, the idea of an absence of voluntarism, of claims to autonomy, in favour of listening to what society as it is has to say is fundamental to pop music. 'You must never follow fashions! To be "in fashion" is a great error. When you follow a fashion, you're already behind it' (Gilbert Bécaud). Or, for a young producer of highly commercial songs,

You have to imagine what the public will like three or four months from now, when the record comes out. Not to forget the other records that could come out with something new, musically or otherwise, and in doing so outdate your record! You often see three or four records come out practically at the same time which are trying to get at the same thing, exploiting the same idea,

something that was in the air. Generally, of course, only one makes it and the others flop!

Such success hinges on the lightness of the implicit. One must avoid words with too obvious a connotation, or with a single meaning, or with over-strong effects which tend to replace the allusion by the issue itself. One has to write in an 'open' style. Only Sardou* can dare to say 'They've got the oil, but that's all' (referring to Arab countries).

This obligation to be simple does not guarantee a lyric will be good: it might have the necessary familiarity, be related to everyday events, and yet be lacking in appeal. Once again, it is through the selection of words that the appeal must be made; certain key words, in contrast with the obviousness of the other words, which are like tiny reservoirs briefly holding the social significations of the moment, function as pure signifiers: mysteriously, they have an autonomy of their own within the meaning of the text, and are selected for the way they ring, for the expressive power which gives them their opacity; they have to engage the imagination of the listener, and at the same time effect a sort of disengagement from the everyday words of the text, so that the role of dream can be given full play. These unexpected metaphorical turns of phrase interrupt the unfolding of the text, giving one a shiver of pleasure, in a way very similar to the effect of the musical 'gimmick'.

There is a clear example of this double function in one of Dave's songs: 'Tant qu'il y aura' (As long as there are [sun in the sky, cows in the fields, birds in the sky . . .]). Against a background which evokes ecological themes, though of course without naming them or discussing them head-on, there suddenly emerges the expression 'sorcerer's apprentice', more hermetic and belonging neither to the context of the song nor to that of its theme, yet maintaining an intuitive connection with them. It imprints itself on the memory and pins together the melody and the lyric.

This opposition between *word-quotes*, which enrich the context, and *keywords*, which serve as metaphors, is obviously less clear-cut in the case of the work of 'artistic' singer–songwriters (*chansons 'à texte'*), where, for reasons of poetic ambition, there is more integration of formulae and images. But the principle of putting 'punch' in songs by means of striking images and evocative phrases remains the rule in lyrics which must be sung and therefore have to be very short and interspersed with choruses. The 'new-wave French song' created by author–composer–singers who are more sensitive to their lyrics, provides such examples as Francis Cabrel's 'Je dois clouer des notes à

* one of the best-selling singers in France, well-known for his right-wing views and approval of 'silent majority' themes.

mes sabots de bois' (I must nail some notes to my wooden clogs), or, in
Laurent Voulzy's 'Le coeur grenadine' (Pomegranate heart), 'J'ai laissé
dans une mandarine/Une coquille de noix bleu-marine' (I left a
navy-blue walnut shell in a tangerine). In 'Nous', sung by Hervé
Vilard, the text bounces from flashes of originality to clichés: 'Un éclat
de rire en plein coeur' (a peal of laughter straight from the heart),
'quatre rayons ôtés au soleil' (four sunbeams taken from the sun).

The style. The style adapts itself to the vocabulary which is used and to
the singer, rather than existing for its own sake. It has only certain
limited means of its own with which it can underline a song's
construction, which is quite independent of it: repetitions (to point up
contrasts between verses and chorus); rhymes (to help in the
punctuation of the musical periods), etc. Its role is more important in
the context of the story-line, to place the characters and even more the
imaginary nature of the drama. The frequent use of the direct style
where, for example, the 'I' addresses itself to the 'you', even though it
is obvious from the lyrics that the 'you' in question is far away,
instantly gives the song the form of a fantasy, of a daydream in which a
character speaks aloud to someone who is not there. The direct style
not only enables the listener to identify with the hero of the song and
allows for the direct expression of feelings, it also invites the audience
to put itself in the situation of the dreamer; the song is dreamlike in
nature not only because of its content, which describes a situation and
proposes an imaginary revenge against a cruel beloved; it is first and
foremost, and more discreetly, the style which invites the listener to
hear the song as 'natural', as though it represented his own fantasies.

The versification. In this way the style makes the lyrics embrace the
action of the song. But the style must also fit the music and the main
character. In the world of pop music, it is pretty meaningless to say of a
lyric that it is good: it is only one piece of the jigsaw puzzle and must be
judged not on its own merits but on the way it fits in with the other
pieces, both distinct from them and at the same time completely
dependent on them. Producers often assert in a somewhat emphatic
fashion: 'There is only one text for a tune, and only one tune to which a
text can be sung.' Or, as the singer might put it: 'It's a mistake to think
that a song is a poem. A songwriter is not a poet. This means that when
I'm given some lyrics for a song without the music, I'm just not
interested. I can't judge the words without the music.' (Dave) An
experienced producer goes into greater detail: 'Unlike certain other
forms of expression, songs are a composite genre: a song is made up of
words and music, certain words for a certain music and none other . . .

It's like cooking or like magic: if it doesn't work, there's nothing you can do about it.'

For the music, what matters most is the versification: verbal accents must coincide with musical stresses (see Ex. 5, where words and music rise together to reach the word 'en*fant*' and fall again to *'main'*), or else their displacement must be knowingly handled (see Ex. 6, where the accent, displaced from 'cri*é*' to 'cri*é*', coincides with a 'blue' note, between G♯ and G♮, on which the chorus culminates and the voice emits the 'too much sorrow' of the next phrase). The important words must coincide with the musical high-points, the density of the text with that of the music, etc. But even more than in these technical ways, the association between lyrics and tune must rest on a succession of converging associations which are able to link the one to the other through analogous images or 'colours'. The text must express in some way what the music says already. If it is the other way round, the listener will reject it. He will recall only the tune of a song if the right words have not been 'found', whereas he will memorise both words and music if the lyrics are 'good'. This relationship calls for many alterations, for progressive, empirical adaptations according to the results. 'For "La primavera" with Gigliola Cinquetti, I had nine different lyrics. I had already recorded one text out of the six which I had selected at the beginning. I didn't like it. I took the tape back to Italy, and re-recorded over there . . . I think it's the only way to go about it.'

Songwriters, composers and producers need the 'public's ear' for this task. It may be true, as they often claim, that there are no written rules, no infallible tricks to guarantee the success of the equation, that you need intuition, quickness of judgement and feeling rather than any theories out of a book. But this does not mean that such a talent is a gift from Heaven or that it defies analysis. It does require a certain form of sensitivity, a knack for grasping that what words and music say

Example 5

Prendre un en - fant par la   main _____

Example 6

Et j'ai cri - é   cri - é! ___ etc.

depends less on their internal properties than on the way they call up social meanings. This type of awareness as to which words and musical phrases are pregnant with meaning at any given time stems more from personal experience than from any formal learning. It relates to what a person *is* rather than to what he knows. The good professional is someone who in his own life has felt the meanings held in common by his audience and whose experience enables him to seize upon them before their manipulation blunts their significance.

This intuitive knowledge of public meanings (*valeurs-pour-le-public*) is even more necessary when it comes to the creation of a singer's 'persona' and its relationship to the music and the lyrics which, in a sense, it 'caps'. It is at this level that, through his relationship with the singer, the part played by the producer is decisive.

Creating the persona

A voice. When looking for new singers, producers do not judge a candidate by his repertoire – they will build it up from scratch anyway – nor, initially, by his technical skills – these can be tinkered with. What they do try to recognise first and foremost, and to single out wherever possible, is a 'voice'.

That voice, as they conceive of it, is from the start an element with a double meaning, physiological and psychological. It will be the basis for the relationship which must be established between the singer's persona and his songs. Having a 'voice' in pop music terms does not mean possessing a vocal technique or systematically mastering one's vocal capacities. Instead, a voice is an indication of one's personality. 'Personally, I prefer a singer who is marvellously himself in front of a mike even if possibly he sings . . . I won't say exactly out of tune, but not absolutely in tune either . . . rather than a singer whose pitch is perfect but who stays cold, like a choral singer, and who doesn't project anything' (an independent producer who specialises in the teeny-bopper market). When singers practise a lot and take singing lessons, they do so mainly in order to develop their stamina for going on stage and to learn how to sing without straining their voice. Working on their sound might well make them lose their originality even if they did gain in proficiency.

What counts is having an interesting sound which attracts attention: inflections, accents and a way of expression which is immediately recognisable. One producer's criterion is that 'something has to happen even on a "la-la-la"'. In other words, it is not the voice for its own sake that matters but its expressive power. The producer listens out for what the infinite nuances of a particular voice have to say, in

order gradually to find coherent translations on other levels: music, lyrics, record-sleeve, etc.

It is at this first moment of contact more than at any other that the producer assesses the singer for what he is, quite apart from any self-awareness or any technique he might have and regardless of what he can do already. To speak of the singer's inner self, as contained in his voice, does not imply any reductive psychologism nor any unilateral stress on the individual; on the contrary, the details of his personal history, which has made him what he is, will mean nothing to the public unless they refer to a certain social condition, at a conscious or an unconscious level. 'Each star is a completely stereotyped product which corresponds to a persona . . . Take Le Forestier: he's exactly what young people are today, nice rebels in clean blue jeans' (a promotions assistant).

By way of illustration, it is interesting to note that, in terms of this single element, the voice, in French pop songs, one can see coming to the surface the ancient dichotomy between the Oc and the Oïl tongues;* a great majority of France's singers are of Occitanian origins, and have thus given what is thought of as French pop music a quite distinct phrasing and vocal type.

An image. On the visual level, the singer's appearance, the way he moves and stands, the way he dresses, all have a function of expression analogous to that of his voice. He must intrigue us, compel our attention, make us want to get to know him just on the strength of his appearance. 'Mike Brant could not go unnoticed. Anyone who caught a glimpse of him wanted to know who he was. Though he was very reserved, his personality was very forceful. It emanated from him. That's what star quality is about: being a guy people turn to look at in the street even though they don't know him.' (His former producer)

A star's 'magnetism' must exist, if only in embryonic form, before success comes and before he learns those techniques which will aid his development. This first impression is the foundation of the image which the singer will construct for his public. But perhaps the comparison between image and voice stops here: in a song, as in real life, the voice is less deceptive than the physical appearance, more revealing of the true personality, cannot be manipulated at will as easily as can the external appearance. It is the voice first and foremost which conveys a singer's authenticity, sometimes through a raw and

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* Occitania was the ancient kingdom of southern France (roughly south of the Loire). The French spoken there was the *langue d'Oc*, that in the north, the *langue d'Oïl*. Some Occitan dialects are still spoken.

bitter quality over which he has no control (having a harsh, cracked or rasping voice has never stopped anyone from becoming a singer; on the contrary, think of Adamo and Aznavour). His image, on the other hand, which is easier to 'polish', has the opposite function: it serves as a pleasing, seductive or amusing façade which conceals under a familiar and neutral aspect the unacknowledged source of the pop star's appeal.

One can make analogies here with the complementary roles played by melody and arrangement in a song. Much more than with the voice, certain rules prevail and are standard practice when it comes to constructing the singer's physical image: tricks of dress, make-up, hair-do, lighting. Around the singer's gaze, which remains more authentic, an image is organised, quite superficial and contrived, which reassures fans that their idol corresponds to the usual canons of physical beauty. Singers who do not have 'the face that fits the job' have just as hard a time selling as those who sing 'out of character'.

When Claude-Michel Schönberg sang 'Le premier pas' (The first step), which was a super song, he didn't appear on TV until about three months later. He had already sold a lot of records. On the very day he appeared on TV, his sales dropped, as he had expected. People were disappointed; they had imagined what he'd look like from the voice, from the song. The day they saw him, the face didn't fit at all! (His producer)

This image is built up throughout the production phase – promotion, TV spots, the teen press, shows, posters, etc. But it takes shape most of all with the design of the record-sleeve, the overall conception of which is usually the producer's. Apart from the fact that the record cover forges the link which will consolidate the singer's image, it must also convey what makes the song special, while avoiding literal images and too obvious effects.

A 'history'. The singer's real life-story is the source of the meaningful-ness of his voice and his image. But, just like them, it is reconstructed according to the way it is projected visually, verbally and musically in his songs. In the early stages, it tends to comprise the succession of unspoken difficulties which led the candidate to become a singer in the first place, which have forged his special personality and which have made him turn for help to the producer, in obtaining for him the ear of a public. This mediation, by the singer/producer relationship, between the singer's real life-story and his public is not just a matter of theory: those involved themselves value it intensely, sensing as they do that success depends on the result of this transfer mechanism.

As far as the singer's life-story is concerned, even more than the other elements of song production, one cannot speak of technique, of a

musicology of pop music, even in the most general sense. Everything gets mixed up during the discovery/production of the singer's performing personality. He must be able to express himself on stage in a role which, while obeying a precise set of show-business rules, is genuinely 'true to life'. It is that 'truth' which will be heard by the public, which will enable his audience to identify with him and which will bring him success. It is by reformulating his personal problems, but within the social framework of pop music, as recognised by the public, that the singer becomes human in the eyes of an audience which knows exactly how to decipher the language of stars. 'It isn't the song which must give the singer personality but the singer who must give personality to the song.' The use of artifice allows him to rediscover his natural self; the tinsel of his romanticised biography gives him a base for talking about his life.

Some youngsters sing what we call corn, in other words any old thing: but they sing it with such sincerity that it moves people! Others try to sing more complicated things because they don't want to aim for the teeny-bopper market, that sort of thing, and it doesn't work because they aren't sincere. It's not what's really in their hearts. (A producer who himself makes highly successful singles)

The mediation (or rather the *mass-media*tion) which pop music introduces between the social truth of a singer and the public's desire to identify is probably the chief task of the producer. And it is precisely this vital mechanism which most eludes technical description – in terms of conscious methods of manufacture and autonomous know-how, artistic elaboration or tricks of the trade. On the contrary, it is a gradual process which has to let itself be invaded by outside social forces of every sort; it is these forces which dictate in effect the language of pop music: the combination of words, sounds and images through which the public loves its idols. The singer's persona is – right down, often, to almost the finest nuances, without which something sounds false – the collective projection of the singer's reality and that of the public on the screen of pop music. A cliché, perhaps, but a social cliché full of meaning, full of actuality, which alone provokes public recognition and through that the lasting success of the singer:

Caradec's career has constant ups and downs, which means something is wrong somewhere. As far as I'm concerned, he is an artist who when he's got a commercial song – and I don't mean to sound pejorative – is going to sell well. But when he has a song which reflects what he's really like, it doesn't work. Why not? Because he hasn't sold his own personality. When he does well, it's only the song he's selling. If he'd sold himself along with the song . . . You can sell a song without selling the singer's personality – but that isn't how you make a great career for yourself.

Often, by contrast, a song without a personality attached is a disaster. Moustaki composed 'le métèque' (the half-breed) and at first gave it to some unknown to sing; it sold about 300. Moustaki himself came from the Left Bank, had short hair, wore a black suit and a tie, and was not succeeding as a singer. When at last he grew a beard, put on jeans and started looking like a 'half-breed', he sang his life story in the song, complete with external signs of his condition, and went down very well.

Thus, through a song, a voice and an image, it is in the end a life-story and as a result a character which is 'sold' to the public: one sees this in singers' pseudonyms ('they were called Denise and Bernard, you see what I mean . . . we changed their names to Erik and Indira', their producer explained to us during a session with a couple of singers), in their 'biographies' and in the ready-made articles which the promotion departments distribute to the media and to the teen press (*Hit, Podium, Salut, Stéphanie, Star, OK*). It is there, too, in the past which these biographies romanticise: the poverty, belonging to an ethnic minority, the road artist's life, all evidence of rejection and exclusion. Similar are the imaginary adventures which the star offers as fodder for the narrative, and which repeat, in the very public private life of the singer, and in a more spectacular fashion, the amorous ups and downs of his songs. The same rationale explains the highly charged professional relations which exist in show business and which one cannot dismiss as pure affectation; this milieu lives by a 'psychology of the stars': narcissism, intolerance, 'crazy' lives, total dependence on the public – these constitute the quite real, personal other side of the myth which they become. Finally it is the importance of personality which from the start provides the basis for the relationship between singer and producer. Beyond a given voice or appearance, the producer very deliberately selects his singers according to the friendly relationship he can or cannot establish with them. It is a question of whether they 'click' together or not.

Lenorman, for instance, I didn't know him. We had dinner together after a show – he wasn't famous in those days – and we spent four hours talking together! I vaguely knew what he sounded like, but that wasn't what interested me. We had to have a conversation, because that's what I consider the most important. We had so much to say to each other, it was fantastic! (His young producer)

The singer and his producer have to invest a great deal in one another; they must respond to each other's emotional needs, and their past must enable them to understand each other. In other words, perhaps, the producer has to be able to detect in the would-be singer what it is in

his life-story that makes him want to go on stage, to become the star which he, the producer, never can be, while the singer must sense in the producer a high degree of personal sensitivity to what he has to offer, thus finding in him his first real audience.

The producer is not a calculator. His knowledge of the pop music scene and his experience of the public are only of value when he has integrated them within an 'immediate' sensitivity: only then do they mutely guarantee the genuineness of his taste, which can exercise itself spontaneously and in a subjective, non-cerebral fashion. He can forget the criteria which he has interiorised and allow himself to give in to his feelings, to react to what he perceives as purely physical sensations produced by such and such effects: 'I select the takes according to what gives me a thrill when I listen. It's completely idiotic, but that's the way it is. I can't even explain why; it's purely physical, I wait until it makes my skin tingle.' (A semi-independent producer who specializes mainly in quality songs) It is in terms of this emotional response, this sympathy in the strictest sense of the word, that the decisive moment occurs, that moment when a producer decides to take on a new singer because he feels it is going to 'work' between them.

We have to have the first 'shock', the 'love-at-first-sight' feeling, before the public can. We're the middle-men. If we liked it, maybe others will too . . . Different people have different talents but then I meet one I take a violent fancy to, the sound of his voice . . . how can I put it . . . it's got a kind of vibration which does something to me; it strikes a chord and makes me feel good . . . (One of the pop music producers of an American-owned company)

When they look back on such moments, producers cannot recall having had a particular reason or making a deliberate choice: 'Take Herbert Pagani. I went to the Rose d'Antibes five years ago. I didn't need any singers at all that year, I just went for no reason. I saw this guy singing and I told myself he was good. I went and told him so. We worked together and that's how it was . . .'

The heart has its reasons . . . The producer does not so much refuse to listen to logical arguments as consider them of lesser importance; he situates them on another level. Good arguments are useful, but secondary. They are only convenient to back up a case, to rationalise something that has already happened. Reason provides justifications that serve to convince those whose job is not, like the producer's, to feel the 'vibes': the money men, the directors, the commercial and radio men. And it helps to encourage those on the 'artistic' side, in the studios and at the music publishers, who have not yet caught these 'vibes', to stick to the project. But reflection can do no more than back up the producer's initial conviction, and it is this which allows him to

hold out when success takes a long time to come and the doors remain shut:

I'm incapable of working with certain singers, because I don't have the *conviction* they're any good. I can't tell you why I have this conviction! When I started Maxime Le Forestier off, for example, I was absolutely positive that he had a lot to offer. I wrote to one big company to tell them so and they answered 'no, his voice is too thin'. I cut his first record at Festival and it didn't work, the label wasn't good. Maxime went to Polydor and it took several more years. But in the end, with Jacques Bedos, he became the star I had always thought he could become.

This method of work, subjective and 'primitive', must be taken seriously; it is a method whereby a lasting conviction is founded on the immediate pleasure responsible for the producer's initial image, visual and aural, of the singer. For this is basically the same method by which the public will subsequently recognise its idols. There is a truth here which must be acknowledged, even though in turn it needs to be analysed, for its subjective character does not exempt it from being socially meaningful, quite the contrary. But one cannot assert that producers' claims to this physical and irrational impulse are pure 'ideology', an attempt to conceal the rational nature of the social and political criteria they have applied to reach their verdict. Their behaviour in this instance fits in with what they say, and their impulses are genuinely followed up. 'Actually, it's yes or no from the start, often before even listening to them: for example, if a singer's waiting in the hall for the interview as I go in, I can tell from a glance if it's no . . . I'm ready to change my mind during the interview, but up to now my first impression has always been subsequently confirmed . . .' (A young producer in a large company). Moreover, the arbitrary nature of these verdicts works both ways, and the empathy of singer and producer seems to be a decisive criterion of whether the singer's artistic achievement is to be transformed into a commercial success:

Take the case of Dave, for instance; he'd been with Barclay for five years . . . and it wasn't working out. He left Barclay and went to CBS with Jean-Jacques Souplet . . . and his very first record sold 500,000! It was because the singer and the producer had understood each other and were therefore able to make use of one another. Dave was 'brought out of himself', his own feelings were drawn out of him . . . But on the other hand if one doesn't really get on well with a singer, it's better to stop because one can 'block' him completely.

An art of pleasing

Beyond the specific role played by the producer, it is in the end the overall working relationship between the various members of the pop

music professional team which is able to anticipate the public's reactions; each member of the team constantly switches from producing the song to listening to how it sounds, from techniques to image. The real inventiveness of the professional 'hit' producers probably lies in the methods of work they have devised for managing these two aspects of the song – for presenting an *imaginary object*. The characteristics of the mode of production they have created, from the function of the producer to the recording session, all have one aim: the problematic fusion between the universe of techniques, by which objects are made, and that of images, in which an audience wants to invest. Work in the studio consists of eliminating the professional's complacency with regard to his style, watching out for any signs of incipient complicity between those who know what they are up to, bringing back into the 'firing line' of 'primitive' criticism the finds of each member of the team: all this in order to subordinate the meaning a song may have for its creator to the pleasure it can procure for the listener.

The aim of the entire organisation of production is *to introduce the public into the studio* through various means:

(a) through techniques of *cutting* and *mixing* which introduce elements of everyday reality into the song;

(b) through the presence of *witnesses* (such as the young singer himself, who is first and foremost a specimen of his public) and of *representatives* of the public (this is the producer's role both in relation to his singer and in relation to the technicians);

(c) through the working relationships, constituted by *mutual criticism* (each member of the team being an audience for the others), by *subjective listening* (it being pleasure which produces meaning) and by *collective anticipation* (the dynamics of the group constitute a first production–consumption process which one hopes will repeat itself first through the media and later among the public).

The dictatorship of the public (which is obvious everywhere in a genre so often described as manipulation) remains extremely ambiguous. If the public is an ignorant despot with the power to decide once and for all whether a song is a hit or not, it is for this very reason an impotent despot who never has control over the terms of his dictates and whom a clever courtesan can always seduce if she knows better than the despot himself what pleases him. Everything is done for the public, but everything is done on its behalf as well. The real public is not present in the studios. What connection is there between this public and the one which is constantly invoked by the various collaborators in the production of a song? Or rather, what can one do to make the real public sanction the many choices one has made

in its name by massively buying the records that have been pro-
duced?

Part of the answer lies in the follow-up process which is put into
action once the song has been produced: when it leaves the studio, it
still has to be played over the radio and to be distributed. These two
stages make their own mark on the record's history and are decisive as
far as its ultimate success is concerned. The full impact of TV and radio
exposure has yet to be studied properly; but it does not hold the entire
key to the problem: for though it can certainly hinder a song's success,
it cannot create success for just any song, assuming merely that it has
been recorded in accordance with a few simple norms. Success is born
during the early stages of a song's production, and no amount of
'plugging' on the radio can force the public to adopt it if it was a failure
on that level. The only guarantee of success which producers can hope
for – and it is a precarious guarantee at best – lies in the introduction
into the studio of a relationship between song and listener analogous
to that which will later bind the song to its real public. A song-object is
not produced first and consumed later; rather a *simultaneous produc-
tion–consumption* process takes place first inside the studio, and the
impact on those present must be repeated later on outside the studio.
Success is a *gamble* by the producer on his identification with the
public. This gamble is often a losing one and is always unpredictable,
but it pays handsome dividends when he wins. In the studio, the
producer could only grope his way to success; this holds true also of his
search for public approval.

The notion of a gamble is a fundamental one. First of all, it is relevant
to the way that pop music is produced. It is the basis for the
relationship between the large companies and the small producers,
who reap the benefits of being in closer touch with the public. The
gamble in question has nothing to do with luck; it accounts for the
'hit'-form of the record business, the all-or-nothing nature of success
which suddenly crystallises around one number, leaving a dozen other
almost identical songs unsold. But beyond that, the notion of a gamble
is central to the very nature of the song. If, as has already been stated,
the only unifying principle of a song lies in the pleasure it offers to its
listeners, it is impossible for the producer to go by a set of hard and fast
rules. All he can do is gamble on a given song, which is nothing
until the public gives it meaning by appropriating it. There is no such
thing as art for art's sake in pop music. A song has no objective re-
ality or value in itself. If it is a flop, there is no posterity to rehabili-
tate it. It exists only to be accepted by its own times as a sign of those
times.

The images of the public

At last we come to the public which gives the song its meaning and its substance. The final consumption of a song is the only measure of its potential, which was purely hypothetical until that moment. If it is successful, the spark which consumes it reveals the reality of its expressive charge, while at the same time annulling it. Pop songs do not create their public, they discover it. The opposition which the sociology of culture operates between statutory consumption by elites on the one hand, and the industrial production of mass culture on the other, stresses in both cases the arbitrary imposition of meanings by producers and sellers. The public is looked upon as passive, ready to absorb whatever it is presented with so long as the label fits the social category.

   This vision overlooks the active use to which people put pop music, the imaginary existence they lead through it, which is not reducible to the official social hierarchies. To speak of the transmission of codes which map out the stratification of society is a theory which solves too quickly the problem of social domination within cultural production, by applying to it the political model of a power pyramid. This is to place cultural production within the ordinary causality of the social order: the socio-political scene which is characterised by real power-relationships, realistic compromises and objective social categories which construct and impose real experience. But when this reality is projected on the screen of pop music, the picture one gets is reversed, as though one were seeing a negative on which were printed the hidden side of current social life. In a rather unreal way, we catch a glimpse of all that official history, always written in terms of the power structure, leaves unsaid: hopes that are disappointed almost before they are formulated, a bitterness that nobody cares about, useless emotions. Producers are the representatives of a kind of imaginary democracy established by pop music; they do not manipulate the public so much as feel its pulse. They offer up their songs to the public in the hope that it will recognise itself in them, just as one suggests various phrases to a dumb person until he nods in agreement. Producers do not control the public's desires but rather fulfil them. Their power lies not in imposing a particular view of the public, but in proposing one. In this imaginary world, social domination gives way to complicity: the complicity of the public which knows it must beg for the idols that the companies offer; the complicity of the singer who knows he must endorse the persona which the producer suggests to him. The producer's art lies in trial and error: in guessing, espousing and fanning the flames of passion for which words are lacking, and, in

desperation, whose only outlet lies in the periodic infiltration of a new style, which comes, in the nick of time, to speak for the underdogs of society.

Thus the producer's role is so subjective, so bound up with identification and projection, that it becomes even more of a social one; rather than genuinely express the passions which it reflects, pop music organises youthful, mobile social groups still in the process of forming. It draws together potential groups still ignored by the politicians, whose members share the same unspoken frustrations. It gives a self-image to latent communities whose members have in common the feeling of not belonging to an established social category (whether that of the dominators or of the dominated: thus, 'the rocker' may represent the young worker plus the violence which has been stifled through 'politicisation' by the workers' movements; 'the disco fan', the young typist with no future plus the pleasure of being no more than a body abandoning itself to a collective rhythm; 'the punk', the 'kid' without the likeable constructive enthusiasm which he is blamed for not possessing).

Imaginary identities, sentimental adventures, a taste of what reality represses: pop songs open the doors to dream, lend a voice to what is left unmentioned by ordinary discourse. But pop is not *only* a dream-machine: perhaps, like witchcraft in another age, it is the unofficial chronicle of its times, a history of desires existing in the margins of official history, which, except at rare moments of rupture, do not speak but act. In setting out a history of today, popular culture etches the contours of a history of tomorrow in that it 'feels' a social atmosphere in its earliest, unformulated stages; pop music senses the current and projects a first image of it, long before the politicians have grasped its real nature or had the time to quell it, before words have been found to express it or to betray it. Pop songs hold up a mirror to their age in the truest sense of the word, for they provide it with a blank screen on which its desires are reflected. It is paradoxical that reflection theories of art, which fail to explain art because they deny its role as a mediation, finally become relevant when the word 'art' loses its meaning: in pop music – except that this reflection requires a lot of work, from many professionals: 'immediacy' costs a lot.

(translated by Marianne Sinclair and Mark Smith)

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