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Look! Hear! The uneasy relationship of music and television

SIMON FRITH

Abstract

Television is an essential part of the star-making machinery of the music business and music accompanies nearly all television programmes, and yet the relationship between the two is uneasy. Television does not seem to be an essential part of musical culture and adds little to music aesthetically. Music has had little impact on the form or aesthetics of television. And yet television has certainly had an impact on music and particularly on the mediation of rock and the formation of the modern pop/rock aesthetic. Here it is not music in television that is important but television in music. The 1950s was a significant turning point in popular music history not so much because of the musical revolution of rock 'n' roll but because of the impact of television.

I

In the popular music literature there are two broad views of television. On the one hand, it is understood as a medium of great importance. It is the most effective tool of star-making and record promotion. Television programmes from *American Bandstand* through *Top of the Pops* to *Yo, MTV Raps!* have shaped the social meanings (and our memories) of artists and genres. On the other hand, television is thought not to be very important at all. Music has not been a central part of its programming. The television audience is rarely conceived as a music audience. TV-made pop stars almost always lack musical credibility.

As I started writing this paper, the best-selling single in Britain was Will Young's 'Evergreen/Anything'. The record had more than a million sales in its first week of release, outselling all other singles combined. Young's success was the effect of a television programme, *Pop Idol*, an elaborate talent contest, based on audience votes, which Young won. Young and *Pop Idol* runner-up, Gareth Gates, were the biggest pop phenomena in Britain since Hear'Say, who in 2001 became the first band to top the UK album and singles charts simultaneously with debut releases. Hear'Say was put together in an earlier TV talent show, *Popstars* (a format that had already created new stars in Italy and Australia).

In current British TV schedules, talent shows like *Pop Idol* run alongside another kind of music programme with a more recent provenance: the instant nostalgia show. In these programmes the history of music (and television) is celebrated in lists: top tens of country music or girl groups or disco; the best 100 songs, the greatest 100 albums; viewers' favourite commercials. The basic format is the same across a variety of titles: clips from the television archives, interviews with the acts,

their producers and minor celebrity fans, a mocking voiceover, an underlying sense that musical passion is ridiculous. Such programmes have little promotional effect (there's not much evidence of old records being successfully re-released to cash in on such lists) but they do suggest that television producers have found a new way of using music to get ratings.

What do programmes like *Pop Idol* and *When Disco Ruled the World* tell us about music and television? Do they confirm that television matters or that it does not? The answer, clearly, is both. Television makes pop stars and yet its treatment of music seems strangely detached. It is rare to watch a television programme without music, and just as rare to watch a programme that is really about music. Television matters for music in some ways and, *for the same reasons*, not in others. In aesthetic terms, certainly, the history of television and the history of music seem quite separate. Except in the case of rock. In this paper I will argue that while rock may, ideologically, claim to be anti-television (as articulated in many songs), it is, in fact, the only musical genre which could be said to be televisual. In arguing this I will first consider the history of music and television generally and then replay the argument with specific reference to rock. But before proceeding I want to dispose of one outstanding problem: music video.

There was a time in popular music studies (from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s) when it seemed as if the analysis of music and television would be transformed by studies of music video. Music video analysis was added to music analysis as a necessary academic skill. The MTV Corporation was studied with more interest than the record business. Scholars from other fields – film studies, cultural studies, media studies – suddenly found pop music interesting as a site for general arguments about postmodernism.¹

Ten years on most of this literature seems curiously overblown. It has left little mark on either TV or music studies, and, more surprisingly, music videos themselves now seem to arouse little interest except from the few scholars devoted to close textual analysis. MTV these days is better understood as a youth service than a music channel, its promotional effects indicated by sales figures rather than by an account of how it has changed musical values or perceptions. There are not, to my knowledge, any systematic studies of the video audience; there is little published work on the process of video production.² Even music video arguments, in short, reflect the general paradox of music and television with which I am concerned. They either overestimate the significance of video clips or do not pay them any serious attention at all.

II

If it is arguable that television was the most significant medium of political and commercial communication in the twentieth century, it is not clear that it has been a very effective means of musical communication. The instructive comparison here is with radio. Television programming was shaped by broadcasters with thirty years of radio experience behind them but there turned out to be important differences between the two media, differences that have been particularly significant musically.

In the period 1920–50 the radio and music industries developed a symbiotic relationship. Music on record became the basis of radio programming; radio play became the basis of record selling. Radio was crucial for the emergence of new

popular music genres (jazz and blues and swing and hillbilly), and just as important for the making and marketing of classical records. Radio provided a livelihood for trained musicians and serious composers, and helped develop a new sort of high music culture. In commercial radio systems classical music programming was an effective weapon in the pursuit of the upmarket audience; in public service systems classical music broadcasting was an essential part of stations' perceived duty to educate as well as to entertain their listeners, to sustain the national cultural heritage as well as to promote contemporary creativity. And radio, as the first medium to bring a nation together in the simultaneous experience of the same event, also changed the experience of live music, putting performers into the home and transporting listeners into the audience, whether for a Proms or Carnegie Hall concert, for a hotel dance band, for a field recorded folk singer or club recorded crooner. If radio had not been invented, the history of music in the twentieth century would have been quite different.

The same thing could not be said immediately of television, whose significance for music makers and listeners, music promoters and scholars, has been much less clear-cut. This is not to say that TV broadcasters did not assume from the start that television would be a musical medium like radio. Europe's public service broadcasters have continued to invest heavily in the television transmission and staging of classical musical events, and in the early days of US television the gesture was still made at musically 'uplifting' programmes (Leonard Bernstein's *Young People's Concerts*, for example), even if today such classical concerts are confined to minority outlets, to niche cable and digital services like BBC4 and Artsworld.

The medium was immediately significant for popular musicians. In the USA the biggest singing stars of the 1950s (Dean Martin, Elvis Presley) came to national fame as a result of their appearances on TV variety shows, and the popular music industry realised at once that television was a potentially fundamental component of the star-making machinery whatever the music involved (whether Ricky Nelson or Van Cliburn). There is no doubt either that late 1950s pop music shows like *American Bandstand* and *Oh Boy!* helped articulate a new sort of youth music culture. That said, the subsequent emergence of rock as popular music's dominant form occurred despite and even as a critique of television culture, which became identified with the blandest sort of easy listening balladeers (Andy Williams, Val Doonican) and the most crassly commercial examples of teen idols. Far from promoting new sorts of music, television since the 1960s has always seemed to be behind the times – for European rock fans, the Eurovision Song Contest is perhaps the most obvious symbol of TV's celebration of pop archaism. It was only with the emergence of cable television in the 1980s that a music television service was developed with anything like the day-to-day significance of music radio. Music television, MTV, duly aped Top 40 radio formats, with playlists, veejays, 'hot' releases, 'breaking' singles, etc.

There are a number of overlapping reasons for television's limitations as a music medium. To begin with, most people's television sets have poor sound quality (and television sound has become relatively worse over the years as the quality of recorded and radio sound has improved with the development of hi-fi recording techniques and FM/VHF transmission). Even now that digital recording is the norm few people have – or seem to want – good television sound.

They do not want it because television is not primarily a sound medium. The musical experience is by its nature enveloping. Music may have a specific source

of origin (the orchestra; the CD player) but it is heard as being everywhere (in the concert hall, in the room). As listeners we put ourselves into the music, and as radio became more portable so music became something to take with us, to change our sound environment. Television cannot offer this sort of music experience whatever its sound quality (which is why experiments with simultaneous broadcasts – pictures on the TV screen, sound from FM radio – are usually unsuccessful). To watch television is to focus on a fixed and relatively small space (compare the surround effect of the cinema screen) and to watch live concerts on television is to raise immediately the problem of what or who the camera should look at, a problem even the best editors cannot solve. At live concerts we can look at the whole (the orchestra) and the particular (the conductor, the fourth cellist) simultaneously, just as we hear them simultaneously; on television we can only see one thing at a time. Most television sets are too small for comfortable split screen editing. To engage our interest musical programmes have to offer more than music.

This is the technical factor that underlies television's peculiarity as a source of information and entertainment. Television programming is not sound-centred but picture-driven, organised around an aesthetic of immediacy (rather than reflection). Its narrative conventions depend on the concept of programme flow, on the ideology of actuality, on methods of grabbing viewers' fickle attention, on repetition and recognition, on series and soap operas and situation comedies, on news bulletins and sports events. The television composer (unlike the film scorer) has to be expert with the jingle, the theme tune, the link. Music on television is less often heard for its own sake than as a device to get our visual attention.

There have been moments when music on television has had a direct impact (Elvis Presley's comeback concert in 1968, the Live Aid show in 1985, the funeral of Princess Diana in 1997) but this has been as much an effect of the programmes' news values as of their musical quality. And the same goes for such TV rituals as *Top of the Pops*, *The Last Night of the Proms* and the *Eurovision Song Contest*, for youth music programmes from *Ready Steady Go* and *Old Grey Whistle Test* to *The Tube*, for the otherwise unexpected television interest in music competitions such as *Young Musician of the Year*. The musical moments that we remember are the ones that disrupt the flow, that become *newsworthy*. Music is omnipresent on television, in short, but the television experience is rarely just about music.

And this is true even of programmes addressing music. Music has been covered by arts magazines from *Monitor* to *The South Bank Show*; music, and musicians of all sorts are routinely the subject of documentaries. But few of these have changed the way we hear or understand a composer or composition; few have used the television medium itself in a musical way – which is why, more than thirty years on, Ken Russell's musical biographies (made for the BBC arts programme, *Monitor*) still seem extraordinary: they both changed our view of composers (Delius, for example) and suggested that television, in its technical ability to combine sound and pictures, to *dramatise* the creative process while documenting it, was, after all, an ideal medium for musical argument. Russell's achievement was to use television's own conventions to open up musical experience (rather than to try to impose a musical orthodoxy onto television); his films depended on narrative dispersal, on a sense of actuality, on emotional spectacle. As music television programmes, though, they remain unique (there is no programme on popular music with the same resonance). The only obvious comparison is with Dennis Potter's reworking of the musical as a televisual rather than theatrical form in *Pennies from*

Heaven and *The Singing Detective*. While other dramas have used popular music as a narrative device, they have tended to draw on film scoring (*Heartbeat*, *Morse*) or music video conventions (*Miami Vice*), rather than make music work televisually. And even in series influenced by Potter's experiments – *Moonlighting*, *Ally McBeal* – the musical interludes seem incidental to the storyline rather than integral to it. (The one US show that did seek a new way of putting music at the heart of the narrative, *Cop Rock*, was a complete failure.)

When television transmission first began, it was assumed that TV would be a medium particularly appropriate for musical theatre, for forms integrating sound and spectacle like opera and ballet. The BBC duly transmitted an opera, Gounod's *Faust*, in 1937; Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* was shown on American television in 1940, Menotti's 1951 *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was commissioned as a television work. But television has not turned out to be significant as a source of new musical works. Stravinsky's *The Flood* was written for TV in 1962; there have continued to be a steady series of TV dance commissions, especially in continental Europe, despite the small screen's constraint on choreographers. But such new works have had little audience appeal. Michael Tippett's *New Year*, an opera commissioned by the BBC for transmission in September 1991, had the lowest primetime viewing figures of any programme broadcast in Britain in the 1990s (next in the 'least watched' list were Judith Weir's *Blond Eckbert* and Benjamin Britten's *Turn of the Screw*). Of the forty lowest rated primetime programmes in the 1990s, more than a quarter were operas. One can understand the consequent reluctance of television executives to invest in new commissions – with fewer than 250,000 viewers these programmes were 'zero rated'. Such figures can be read a different way – Tippett's *New Year* was watched by 143,000 people, the equivalent of seventy full houses at the Royal Opera House, and the Tippett work was undoubtedly seen by a broader cross-section of the public than goes to Covent Garden.³

But the issue here is not so much what is meant by 'popularity' but that in high cultural terms TV has turned out to be a medium for transmitting concerts and theatrical shows to a specialist audience (this is the principle of the BBC's digital arts channel, BBC4, for example) rather than a medium which developed its own kind of high art (as in the cinema). If opera does not really work on television it is because composers have not yet created convincing aesthetic conventions for television opera, and have not felt any particular need to do so. Benjamin Britten's *Owen Wingrave*, for example, commissioned by the BBC for television transmission in 1971, was staged in Covent Garden in 1973 and the critical consensus was that its ideal performance setting was, in fact, a small theatre.

The consequences of television's extraordinary reach as a mass medium for classical music have been different. Just as a series of TV actors and actresses have had unlikely second careers as pop singers, so numerous fragments of classical music have had an unexpected second life as advertising tracks, their emotional meaning defined by products and sales talk rather than by composers and conductors.

The dominant use of music on television, one might conclude, is to sell things. Long before the classical divisions of music corporations were packaging *Relaxing Classics* or *Classic Chillouts*, they were marketing anthologies of 'classic advertisements' and these days dance albums are as likely to make their money from TV sync fees as from retail sales or air play.⁴ And there is a further point to be made here. Music programmes as such tend to be conceived and presented as events that

will interest the TV audience regardless of their particular tastes. Television has not, on the whole, developed specialist programmes for particular music markets (jazz or reggae, country or baroque).⁵ There is an obvious economic reason for this – television advertisers do not often target music markets – and a less obvious one. Because of TV's promotional power, record companies have been willing to foot the bill for TV music programmes showcasing their acts. Television companies now take this for granted: music programmes are only made with such financial support. They do not feature acts or genres that do not have a promotional budget behind them.

The suggestion that music on television is primarily a sales device is hardly news to the music or advertising industries, but the general consequences for music and television do need spelling out. It is certainly arguable that the most common TV uses of music derive from conventions developed in commercials. I would point to three such conventions, in particular.

First, music is used to aestheticise the reality we see. This is perhaps most obvious these days in sports coverage, but has long been a feature of television documentary and is beginning to be used as a technique for news and current affairs (ITN was censured for putting music, by Gounod, to footage of the events of 11 September). Second, music is used to ground what we see, to tie a moment to a familiar song. This is perhaps most obvious in those programmes that combine archive footage with period hits, but the device has become common in dramas too. Pop songs are being used here not just to indicate a place or time or even to tug on emotional memories (as on film soundtracks) but to make historically important or dramatically intense scenes mundane (just as advertisers use familiar pop songs to imply that fantasy is routine). Third (drawing on both the previous approaches), music is used as an ironic commentary on what is seen, to distance viewers from the action and make them feel more knowing. Songs used in this way do not need to be directly related to the situation (whether historically or lyrically) – their very irrelevance can add to their effect. It is striking that when such programmes are successful – *Cold Feet*, *Teachers*, *Trigger Happy TV* – the tracks used are collected and sold as anthologies, *The Teachers CD*, *The Trigger Happy TV Music Collection*, volumes, 1–3. Here is the circular argument beloved of advertisers: because this is your sort of music this must be your sort of television; because this is your sort of television this must be your sort of music. The relationship of music and television is not organic but a matter of branding.

III

When Pink Floyd appeared on *Bandstand*, singer and guitarist Syd Barrett adamantly refused to move his lips to the playback of their two British hits; he just stood there, immobile, while the rest of the band sheepishly mimed along behind him. (Shore 1985, p.110)

It is intrinsic to the ideology of rock that it is anti-television. There are a number of historical reasons for this. The development of television as the basic domestic means of entertainment in the 1950s meant the decline of radio as a family form and its pursuit of new, more narrowly defined markets. One of these markets was youth, and youth radio shaped the success of youth music. Rock 'n' roll began as a primarily radio experience and continued to be so through the 1950s and 1960s. A simple syllogism was established: rock 'n' roll was defined by youth radio; youth radio was defined against TV; rock 'n' roll was defined against TV.

Market research suggests that 'youth' is the age group that watches television least – if only because it is the age group that spends most leisure time out of the house in public spaces (and that is the most receptive to new leisure technologies – computer games, online chat rooms). Youth self-consciously differentiates itself from the rhythms of daily family life, and when TV scheduling is tied to the family audience it therefore tends to be wary of youth fads. Youth music, rock 'n' roll, was broadcast on television in the 1950s but framed by the family narrative. As Dick Clark notes about *American Bandstand*,

There were rules of dress and behaviour that had to be adhered to for the kids to get on the show. The dress code required that boys wear a jacket and tie, or a sweater and tie. Nobody dressed that way in real life, but it made the show acceptable to adults who were frightened by the teen-age world and their music. Girls couldn't wear slacks, tight sweaters, shorts or low-necked gowns – they had to wear the kind of dresses or sweaters and skirts they wore in school. No tight toreadors or upturned collars. (Clark 1976, p. 67)

And as John Hill comments about 1950s Britain:

In the cinema, 'teenpics' could be successfully marketed at the increasingly important youth audience, but television, with only two channels, had to make more of an allowance for the domestic and familial context in which it was received and hence the more heterogeneous nature of its audience. This was especially true, perhaps, of what the press had dubbed 'tea-time TV', with its implied image of the family gathered around the television set while eating. With the launch of *Six-Five Special*, it was also Saturday teatime when pop music was most likely to be seen on TV in the years which immediately followed.⁶ (Hill 1991, p. 94)

Six-Five Special and subsequent British pop music shows were therefore also meant to appeal to parents. The youth show was the youth club show; youth music provided a bit of a laugh for grown-ups. It was this kind of packaging that rock fans and musicians came to despise. Rock 'n' roll stars might become family entertainers (like Cliff Richard and Tommy Steele); the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix did not. On the one hand, rock was not easy to absorb into the routines of TV variety. It was too loud; lip-syncing was an affront to authenticity; guitarists and drummers expected as much camera attention as singers. On the other hand, TV seemed to be the defining site of the commercial pop from which rock was seeking to distinguish itself. The rock contempt for Will Young and Hear'Say (as seen in *NME* and on assorted newspaper rock pages) draws on a stream of invective that is more than thirty years old.⁷

So far so familiar. But consider the counter argument. What if the simultaneous rise of TV and rock 'n' roll was not just a matter of media reordering but also aesthetically significant? What if rock itself has to be understood as a TV product?

The issue here is actually quite straightforward. The importance of television for promoting rock 'n' roll stars from Elvis Presley onwards was that it meant potential fans *got to see them*. Rock music (like all music) is a visual as well as aural form and it certainly could be argued that the visual conventions of rock performance were shaped by television – because it was there – in ways that do not apply to musical genres which pre-dated television – classical music, opera, jazz, folk. Performers from these genres are simply shown and whatever the popularity of the *Billy Cotton Band Show* or *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, these were more about bringing stage acts into the living room than about changing their performing conventions. The most popular of such shows was, after all, *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*.

The use of television to provide a visual code for its youth audience is most obvious in shows that were designed as displays of the latest teen fashions and dance steps. Hill describes the role of the studio audience in *Six-Five Special* 'as unofficial guides to the latest fashions in clothes, haircuts and, above all, dancing' (Hill 1991, p. 95), a role which was taken from *American Bandstand* and has not really changed on youth music shows to this day.⁸ But what concerns me here is something else: the effect of television on performing conventions. I assume that most rock fans have, like me, memories of TV moments that had a determining effect on their sense of a performer and their music. As a teenager I watched *Top of the Pops* to see what new acts looked like and was duly amused and appalled. But some acts (Jimi Hendrix, for example) simply defied the limits of the box in the corner. They had what can only be called television charisma. Over the years there have been other such acts – Otis Redding on *Ready Steady Go*, Freddy Mercury at the Live Aid Concert, Tracey Chapman on the Free Nelson Mandela show, Jeff Buckley on *Later* – and the question becomes this: How have the conventions of a good rock performance affected the conventions of a good television performance and vice versa?

One of the standard arguments against pop videos in the mid-1980s was that they would mean rock success in the future being determined by who was telegenic. But TV's role in the record sales process means that looking good on television has always been essential for success. I do not doubt, for example, that Elvis looked better on the screen than any of his rockabilly peers, and how else could one explain Cliff Richard's status as Britain's number 1 rock 'n' roller? The fact is that for the vast majority of people – particularly the vast majority of youth (and including the minority who themselves become performers) – rock stars are first seen on television, and what a rock star is meant to be is therefore to an extent defined by television.⁹ And this is true even of those acts which seek to defy TV sales processes, from the Rolling Stones through the Sex Pistols to Nirvana and Eminem.¹⁰

What is the relationship between rock performance and TV performance? The question can be broken down into more specific questions. What sort of *event* is rock on television? How are viewers made to think that something special is happening? How is this event related to other television events? The central issue here is the question of *liveness*. For both television and rock the concept of live music is aesthetically crucial; both media use recording devices to give their audiences a sense of something happening here and now.¹¹ In the ideology of rock lip-syncing is anathema, indicating the essential inauthenticity of TV pop. But as Dick Clark observes:

Every musical motion picture ever made has used the lip-sync technique. I explained the process to the kids and they learned to distinguish between a good lip-syncer and a bad one. We used lip-sync primarily because it was cheaper, but also because it was impossible to duplicate the sound of the record – and it was the record that kids wanted to hear.¹² (Clark 1976, p. 71)

And one could say that both rock and TV performances must be seen as real, felt, exciting, happening. Both use a repertoire of technical tricks to achieve this: camera angles, amplification, lighting, editing, backing tapes, and so forth. Both address the question of audience. What audience is implied by a performance? How is it shown? How is it involved? How is it addressed? There is a clear continuity here between the way in which early TV shows framed and closed up on singers and

the way in which the lead singers of rock bands are foregrounded and lit on stage. And there is continuity too between the way in which TV presenters introduce us to acts – letting us get to know them, as it were – and what we expect from live acts in terms of their own presentation, their own between-song conversation.

What I am suggesting here is that one of the reasons why the conventions of rock performance are different from those of previous pop forms is because of the effects of television. These effects are both positive (television shaped our expectations of pop performance) and negative (rock authenticity is defined against TV convention). And they have a history. The development of television, that is to say, in terms of both technology and ideology, has had its own effects on the history of rock (just as rock developments, in terms of both sound and market, have been reflected on television).¹³

On the late 1950s British show, *Oh Boy!*, for example, there was limited camera movement and unvarying lighting. What the audience saw was a stage show with no depth but an almost lurid attention to surface. Singers were seen in brightly lit close up and their feeling for their songs was mimed as they sang with what seems now an astonishing repertoire of grimaces, grins and hand and shoulder movements (they did not speak to camera at all). Editing was tight to the music (the rhythm of shots determined by the rhythm of the song) but limited to cuts between medium and close-ups, between different singing faces. The pace was fast (no breaks between numbers) and the message seemed to be that what you see is what there is – the audience in the studio (which is heard prominently on the soundtrack but is not seen) is in no sense privileged. Audience noises, the squeals and the screams, are mixed on the soundtrack to match what we see on screen, and even at this distance one can see how the performing conventions established in this TV version of a rock 'n' roll show could be directly enacted on stage, as the live version of the TV version of a live show!

By the mid-1960s, on a show like *Ready Steady Go*, what television offered was a club rather than a theatre experience. The TV viewer now saw the studio audience too, and the camera (on a dolly) was, like the crowd, in constant movement. Its view of the performance could be interrupted by dancers moving across the sightline, by performers moving out of vision. Performances in this show seemed not to be staged for the camera, but to be captured by it. Television was still presenting a happening, but now with the conventions of documentary rather than outside broadcasting. Performers sang to the audience in the studio rather than to the audience at home. TV viewers were watching a performance, but it now also included the studio audience, the studio noise, the studio movement, and even the studio cameras. Lighting was determined by the conventions of the club (the spots and the shadows) rather than by the needs of the domestic audience. The camera seemed to be trying to see things for itself (just another person in the crowd) rather than offering the TV viewer a privileged seat (as in, say, sports coverage).

If in *Oh Boy!* television dominated the music, placing it on the screen just so, in *Ready Steady Go*, music dominated television. Performing styles became more aggressive, unpredictable, and noisy. Lead singers now competed for camera attention with their surrounding musicians who had begun to develop their own visual clichés. The sense of the musical group (the defining characteristic of rock as a genre) was both cause and effect of the new editing conventions, shots determined not by the meaning of the song but by the make-up of the band – everyone had to be shown.

By the time we get to *Snub*, a low budget independent production made for BBC2's youth strand in the 1980s, performing conventions are as much about preserving the mysteries of a musical genre and its fans as about opening it up to the casual TV viewer. *Snub* combined interviews with live footage and videos (usually made specifically for the show) but it had no presenter (it used subtitles), interviewers were always off screen, and the music was presented from the musicians' point of view, with cameras usually on stage. The issue here was authenticity (this was celebrating indie music) and how to protect it *from* television. One answer was to make sure that nothing was ever really clear. Interviews were cut so that one heard only the answers (that were often cryptic, rooted in in-group laughter). Videos were relentlessly arty and experimental. Much of acts' stage performance was invisible – the lighting too dark or too bright, the close-ups too close, the camera movement too confusing. Audiences were glimpsed rather than shown; the musicians usually ignored the cameras altogether.

Here, it was suggested, were secrets that only the cognoscenti knew; here were the conventions of a genre that was formed from introversion.¹⁴ *Snub*, in short, addressed one of the problems that TV has posed to rock: *anyone might be watching!* It is precisely this spillover effect that makes TV so important for promotion: it provides the best way for musicians to reach beyond their usual audiences. But this is also to undermine cult bands' exclusive appeal, and so *Snub* was designed to keep the casual viewer out.

What can we conclude from such case studies?¹⁵ For most people the normal experience of rock music is an experience of records and TV not live shows, and my argument here is that the understanding and expectation of live performance is more likely to be determined by our experiences of record and TV rather than vice versa. This may be most obvious at shows for children and young teenagers – the live shows of pop acts like Steps and S Club 7 have much in common with the live shows of children's TV acts like the Tweenies (using, indeed, large TV screens). But as case studies suggest, this is true of other sorts of acts and audiences too, and there are general reasons why rock and TV may have a more symbiotic relationship than is usually assumed.

For all the ideological importance of its live performance, rock is the first popular musical form to be constructed in the studio.¹⁶ The challenge for both record and TV producer is to create an event, a sense of something alive, from a series of takes and edits. To be commercially successful a record has to cut through the distracted listening of everyday life and a TV performance has to reach out from the TV flow. Record and TV producers all have to deal with issues of authority, audience and history. The performers must seem authoritative, even as their impact is being created by the TV and record producers, who determine how we see and hear them. We must believe that the performers are presenting themselves, even as their presence is determined by technology, by lighting, amplification, sound balance, editing, etc. For both TV and record producers, audiences, similarly, are both there and not there, an imaginary presence.¹⁷ Producers thus have to construct a visual/aural space that we enter and complete in the act of viewing/listening; they have to find modes of address that oblige us to respond. And all this has to be done in historical context, according to performing conventions that are already known. *Ready Steady Go* knew about *Oh Boy!*. *Snub* knew about *RSG*. Rock's continual hostility to convention (in the name of authenticity) means a continual

construction of performing style against convention – hence the peculiar status of *Unplugged*, an MTV show constructed as a critique of MTV.

IV

This ITV production [*Cool for Cats*], which *illustrated* the records played with witty, imaginative and extraordinarily apposite routines by modern dancers, has never been equalled since it finished its run some years ago. All that television can offer instead is a dreary keyhole peep at the teenage clan in action. The absurdity of the whole convention that it makes entertainment when a singer mimes to one of his own gramophone records – simply because the television people cannot reproduce the sound on the record, and the singer cannot sing it well while jiggling about – is not even noticed anymore. (Leslie 1965, p. 167)

The suggestion that television should illustrate or interpret records, rather than show their performance, has always seemed to miss the point. I do not remember *Cool for Cats* (which did not have the impact of *Six-Five Special* or *Oh Boy!*) but I do remember Legs and Co on *Top of the Pops*, whose interpretative dance routines seemed ludicrous, and the meanderingly irrelevant visual clips that accompanied selected album tracks on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. It seemed obvious to me that the visuals that television could most usefully bring to music were not about reading music but displaying it.

One consequence of this is that the history of music and television told from the perspective of music is rather different from the history told from the perspective of television. My argument in this paper has been that while the twentieth century history of classical or jazz or folk music can be told without reference to television, the history of rock cannot. What of the question the other way round? How should the history of television refer to music? I do not think classical music programmes have had much effect on TV aesthetics, and even pop programmes are, I suspect, more interesting for what they reveal about the demographics of television address (and the concept of youth programming) than for their influence on television's use of sound. In general the role of music has been less significant for developing new dramas of sound and vision than as a way of filling silence and leading viewers through the televisual flow. The most important use of music is as a way of signalling what is on (hence the use of theme tunes, jingles, station idents and the tracks behind the titles).

Television is rarely free of music because it is the TV producers' crucial tool in the ongoing attempt to grab and hold people's visual interest (and even MTV works like this – the opening bars of a new track pulling one's attention back to the screen). Television producers and advertisers clearly draw on genre conventions here, and the increasing importance of niche markets has meant the increasing use of existing (rather than commissioned) tracks. If this further refines the ways in which music is used to attract the right TV audience, it also means that nowadays, more than ever, *any* music can be used this way, classical and rock, rap and reggae, jazz and jungle.¹⁸ And so we return to the music/television paradox. The very voraciousness with which television consumes all kinds of music suggests that it has little concern for music as music at all.

Television has always been organised as a series of events. Audiences are offered access to something that seems to be happening in front of them. The key question, whether in a soap opera or a football match, a quiz or a cop show is what happens next. It is the same for music programmes. Who is number 1? Is this record

a hit or a miss? Who has won? Music television means charts, awards, lists, quizzes, rituals, contests. These are ways to engage viewers who might not otherwise be very interested. To be television music must not only be visualised but given a sense of occasion. Television address – as a matter of both voice and setting – means inviting audiences to be part of something *out there* (while staying in their living rooms). Music on television thus involves a combination of presence and distance that is significantly different from the music experience of radio, records or live performance. If we are normally absorbed in and by music – it draws us into its own space and time – television’s account of music resists such absorption. Instant nostalgia shows work well precisely because music that once mattered to people can now be presented at a distance, as a bit of a joke. TV, for all its influence on rock performance, was never really part of its culture.

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Endnotes

1. See, for example, the special MTV issue of the *Journal of Communication Enquiry*, 10/1, 1986, with articles by, among others, John Fiske and E. Ann Kaplan.
2. One such study is presently being written, Carol Vernalis’s *The Art of Music Video* for Columbia University Press.
3. Figures taken from Kamal Ahmed: ‘A nation switches off as the fat lady sings’, *The Guardian*, 19 January 1998.
4. The sync rights to the twelve tracks on Touch and Go’s 2001 album, *I Find You Very Attractive* (Oval/V2), for example, were licensed to at least thirty companies globally for use on TV ads, as title music, background sound and so on. Users included the BBC (for *Gardeners World* and *Meet Jeremy Paxman*), Channel 4 (*Nigella Bites* and *Queer as Folk*), HBO (*G-String Divas*), Carlsberg Spain, Nokia Phones Israel, and Land Rover Shoes Korea.
5. At this point readers are likely to think immediately of exceptions, and there have certainly been country music programmes (*Hee-Haw*), jazz programmes (*Jazz 625*), club music programmes (Pete Waterman’s *His’n’Hers*), and so on. What is striking about such programmes, though, is their uneasy relationship with the relevant fans. In the very process of bringing a musical world to a television audience, such specialist programmes seem to render the music itself faintly (or, in the case of *Hee-Haw*, not so faintly) ridiculous, a point brilliantly made by *The Fast Show* parody of TV jazz. When I’ve asked genre fans for TV memories they do not usually cite specialist shows but music heard in non-music programmes – baroque music on the soundtrack of Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation*, jazz on *Peter Gunn*.
6. *Top of the Pops* continued to be such Thursday tea-time TV until well into the 1990s.
7. Peter Leslie notes that teenagers were already dismissing TV pop presenters (in this case, David Jacobs) as ‘too commercial’ by the early 1960s (Leslie 1965, p. 167). It is interesting that shows in which talent really is an issue – Will Young was hardly faking it – should have become the symbol of commercial trickery. One reason why TV pop programmes may be offensive to rock fans is that they seem to pander to the self-love of music industry figures who claim to be the real source of musical talent – Simon Cowell and Pete Waterman’s role in *Pop Idol* was thus a reprise of Mickey Most and Tony Hatch’s role in *New Faces* and was prefigured long before that by the music biz panellists on *Juke Box Jury*. A show like *Stars in their Eyes*, a talent contest for people whose talent is to sing/perform like a star, also implies that anyone could have been Scott Walker or Tina Turner, if only they’d had the right record company break.
8. That is not to say one can comfortably dance to a TV set. Displays of pop dancing, from *American Bandstand* to *Steps*, work, rather, as instructional videos, routines to be precisely observed for later practice. One reason why 1990s dance music should be treated as a quite

different genre from rock is that television was quite irrelevant to its development and success.

9. Dick Clark points out that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, 'rock'n'roll had little acceptance as a form of live entertainment. In 1959 I put together the first "Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars"' (Clark 1976, p. 230). Hill suggests that in Britain *Oh Boy!* 'sought to generate the excitement of a live stage show' in contrast to *Six-Five Special's* party atmosphere (Hill 1991, p. 96). But it could be argued that the rock 'n' roll package shows that toured Britain in the early 1960s were designed to generate the excitement of *Oh Boy!*. Like Dick Clark's *Bandstand* shows they featured a fast turnover of singing stars playing with a house band and co-ordinated by an MC, just like the TV shows. For a later generation of young viewers, Don Kirshner's *Rock Concert* similarly provided a guide as to what to expect from a live show.
10. The most striking example of this is rap. Rap's commercial success – its appeal to the white suburban rock market – was an effect of *Yo, MTV Raps* which formalised the performing conventions of gangsta rap, in particular. Street style and video style fed off each other (and into Hollywood) and the most 'realist' of genres is simultaneously the most artificial.
11. My suggestion here that rock and TV share an approach to live music is obviously to challenge the usual view that their aesthetics are quite different (see, for example, Tasker 1983). The flaw of such TV critiques is that they treat 'live' performance as uncomplicatedly naturalistic.
12. For the showbiz establishment of the time, rock 'n' roll records were clearly fake precisely because of their dependence on studio technology (of which lip-syncing was just another example). This argument is best exemplified by Stan Freberg's satirical records.
13. The definitive history of popular music on television is still to be written. One problem here is that despite the best efforts of MTV or, more recently, the BBC's attempts to turn *Top of the Pops* into an international brand, television is an essentially local medium. Formats like *Popstars* and *Pop Idol* may be globally popular, but each country needs its own version, and Will Young is no more likely than Hear'Say to be successful in the USA. I know far less about television programmes in Sweden or Germany, Canada or Australia than I know about those countries' music, and I am uneasily aware than many of my references in this article will mean little to people who were not brought up in the UK. I am not even very clear about the history of music programmes on US television since the 1950s (just as American work on MTV rarely appreciates what a different place MTV occupies in other countries' TV landscapes).
14. If *Ready Steady Go*, in the end, drew its conventions from the British documentary movement, from such 1950s films as *Mama Don't Allow* and *We Are the Lambeth Boys*, films that involved outside observers trying to present youth culture on its own terms, *Snub's* references were to low-budget American avant-garde documentaries, to subcultures' accounts of themselves.
15. I am aware that my choices are somewhat random and dependent on what is easily available to view. A detailed history of popular music and television in Britain would reveal, I think, a complicated organic structure rather than a straightforward linear development. The early youth shows bifurcated into teen shows and children's shows (the latter evolving from *Crackerjack* into the various Saturday morning magazines that remain crucial for certain kinds of pop success). Teen shows in turn split into lifestyle shows, semi-political (*20th Century Box*, *The Oxford Road Show*) and entirely entertaining (*The Tube* and *The Word*), consumer shows (*Top of the Pops*), serious music shows (OGWT, *Later with Jools Holland*), etc. A complete chart would be extremely complicated. For a useful initial map, see Tasker (1983).
16. Gary Burns has shown that *Your Hit Parade*, *Bandstand's* predecessor on American TV, had quite different performance conventions not simply because it was less concerned with youth but more importantly because it featured songs not records. It now seems archaic, while there is a path that can be followed from *American Bandstand* to video clips (see Burns 1998; Wolfe 1985). There are useful comparisons to be made between the relationship of records and TV in the 1950s and 1960s and the relationship of big band music and radio broadcasting and crooning and cinema sound in the 1920s and 1930s.
17. See Hennion (1990). Hennion's focus is the recording studio. TV studios may have real audiences but they are subject to such producer control as to be, in effect, constructs.
18. Keith Negus asks whether there is such a thing as TV-unfriendly music. Yes. Music that has to be listened to with complete concentration, *with one's eyes shut!*

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