Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology

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Popular music and ageing

Publication details


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Published online on: 25 Jun 2015

How to cite:
Ros Jennings. 25 Jun 2015, Popular music and ageing from: Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology Routledge
Accessed on: 26 Sep 2023
Music is pancultural, diverse and expressed creatively through many forms and genres across the globe (Davies, 2012). Sociological approaches to music and society have been helpful in highlighting relationships between power, status and cultural tastes and practices in relation to music, especially with regard to social stratification and the opposition of mass and elite cultures (Van Eijck, 2001, Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007). Boundaries between mass and elite musical cultures are becoming more porous than previously suggested. For example, the international success of Dutch violinist and orchestra leader, André Rieu’s almost ‘rock star’ approach to classical music (particularly Mozart, Strauss, opera and operetta) suggests a shift in classical performative strategies to reflect not just the informalization of societies since 1950 (Abbing, 2005) but also the pervasive influence of rock and roll culture. By creating concert spaces where film music and popular European genres such as German schlager and Dutch levenslied sit side by side with works by Strauss, Puccini and even Michael Jackson (2009 Vrijthof Concert, Maastricht, Netherlands), Rieu manufactures a concert space where a new type of ‘greying’ older audience, one that loves classical music but is also influenced by post-1950s popular music, can dance and sing, and where the orchestra members are dressed colorfully and actively convey fun and enjoyment in their musical performance, thereby challenging the traditional etiquette of the classical orchestra.

The global success of English language pop music and its importance in the cultural life of Anglophone countries (for instance the centrality of pop music to both the closing ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympics in Australia and the opening and closing ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympics held in the UK) is indicative of the growing cultural importance of pop music. This has had a powerful influence in shaping the scope and content of academic studies of popular music and the approach taken to understanding of age and ageing. More specifically, despite pop music being a ‘broad and fuzzy’ category (Coulangeon, 2013, p.7), western academic studies have tended to concentrate only on a narrow spectrum of its output, namely English language post 1950s pop and rock and their close generic relations such as disco, hip hop and heavy metal.

As Feld (2000) notes, with the exception of a few ‘crossover’ performers branded as ‘world music’ artists (for example, The Buena Vista Social Club, Cuba; Ladysmith Black Mambazo, South Africa) studies of non-western popular music arise mostly from the discipline of ethnomusicology and focus on indigenous musical forms (for example instrumentation, structure etc.), exploring contextual influences and relationships with tradition. Despite the technological
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facilitation of an increasingly global context for the production, distribution and reception of popular music from around the world, there is a clear difference in the ways that studies of western and non-western music address and think about notions of age. In studies of western popular music, ageing and old age are either ignored completely or considered problematic. This is much less the case in studies of non-western popular music where there is both a genuine and conceptual connectivity between popular music, ageing and tradition. Studies focusing on non-western popular music are comfortable discussing relationships between older and traditional forms of popular music and also popular music performed by older artists (for example, Malcolmson’s (2012) consideration of older bodies and danzón music in Mexico, or Poey’s (2012) reflections on Celia Cruz’s longevity as a Latina music performer). In contrast, studies of western popular music have, until relatively recently, been obsessed with youth and youth cultures and have avoided or marginalized older performers, audiences, practices and style.

It is the therapeutic relationship with popular music in which older people are foregrounded in the west. Studies of music’s effect on mood and its ability in allaying disorientation and agitation (for example, Svansdottir and Snaedal, 2006, Sixsmith and Gibson, 2007) have contributed to clinical practices when caring for older people with dementia, whilst qualitative studies examining the psychological meanings of music in older people’s lives (Hays and Minichiello, 2005) have indicated that music can contribute to older people’s well-being.

Popular music studies in the west have only just begun to extend critical cultural analysis beyond the previous narrow concentration on youth to engage with relationships built with popular music across the life course. The conceptualization of ageing within western popular music studies now stands at a crossroads, where critical approaches to ageing and old age are finally being debated, developed and adapted to consider ageing and relationships with popular music across the life course. This major reconfiguration of the subject area to look beyond youth as its defining element and to acknowledge the importance of ageing and old age in shaping individual and collective identifications, practices and pleasures amounts to a new turn within academic popular music studies in the west.

The following chapter charts some of the main debates that have shaped contemporary western popular music studies in relation to ageing and identifies areas that would be useful as fields of engagement for cultural gerontology in relation to popular music in later life.

The social and cultural significance of music across the life course

Music forms an important aspect of the cultural and social fabric of both individuals and nations (Clarke, 2012). In the 100 or so years since the invention of the gramophone and the advent of mass produced recorded music, musical interactions with audiences have extended beyond the direct experience of live performance (though this is still an important musical experience for many people) to a more mediated set of experiences predicated on evolving technological innovations. As a result, western (and now increasingly global) lives are saturated with multiple musical possibilities and experiences. Technology (including new forms of consumption and sharing via social media) has enabled popular music to be incorporated into both the mundane habits and the significant rituals of everyday life (from having a radio on in the background in the domestic or work setting, to the almost subconscious absorption of music we encounter when walking through shopping malls, to the explicit choice of music for weddings and funerals). In the twenty-first century, experiencing popular music is possibly becoming more significant. It is embedded in lives and quite literally accompanies us from cradle to grave and constitutes a life-long relationship for many people. Popular music provides vital individual, social (including
intergenerational) and cultural connections to understand and interpret human identities across their life course (DeNora, 2000).

### Ageing in/and popular music studies

It is only in the twenty-first century that critical engagements involving the study of popular music across the life course and into old age have started to emerge (DeNora, 2000, Harrison and Ryan, 2010). Recently there have been direct attempts to put concepts of ageing at the center of approaches to the study of popular music (Bennett, 2006, Bennett and Taylor, 2012, Forman and Fairley, 2012, Jennings and Gardner, 2012), studies which pave the way for a new and dynamic area of critical engagement within popular music studies. The realization (certainly in the western world) of the possible impact of an increasingly ageing population coupled with the fact that many of the music cultures and subcultures previously associated with youth can no longer be considered to be youthful are now beginning to expand the focus of popular music studies beyond just that of youth tastes and practices towards interrogating the meanings and uses of popular music in interaction with ageing and old age. From the perspective of ageing studies and cultural gerontology, this tardiness in connecting with issues of ageing and older age is obviously lamentable but, as any review of the impetus and inspiration for the initial development of popular music studies quickly reveals, even the slightest turn towards the consideration of ageing and older age represents a dramatic transformation for the area of study. Quite simply, the theoretical genesis of popular music studies constructed old age as marginal, ‘unhip’ and irrelevant.

The point of origin for popular music studies is 1950s America, the birth of rock and roll and the emergence of its associated youth and teenage identity groupings (Grossberg, 1987). Popular music studies thus became aligned with ideas of rupture (involving separation from the past) rather than with ideas of continuum (linking past, present and future experiences). The result was that an unintentional but unacknowledged form of ageism became embedded within the field of studies. Grossberg (1987) proclaimed that rock and roll was not only a genre of music but also an expressive context for strategies of youth identity—where ‘growing up’ became, at one and the same time, both desirable (to gain access to the mythologized aspirations of sex, drugs and rock and roll) and undesirable (because it also meant becoming ‘grown up’ and boring). Negative associations about ageing became intimately tied to notions of ‘growing up/being a grown up.’ Growing up, as Grossberg indicated, ‘signals the demise of the rock and roller and, in fact, no rock fans ever feel themselves to have grown up completely’ (1987, p. 188).

If the originating scene of popular music studies was the birth of rock and roll, then its primary goal was to ‘legitimate the study of popular culture’ (Click and Kramer, 2007, p. 244). This entailed a battle with the elitism of existing high/low culture debates in relation to music (Paddison, 1982, Adorno, 2002). In the process of establishing legitimacy for the new area of study, popular music studies paradoxically also generated its own canon of what was worthy/unworthy of study. Radical genres and subcultures, musical icons and youth audiences (signifying rupture with the past) were all deemed worthy of study, whilst popular mainstream music genres (and by extension their often older audiences and fans) tended to be ignored.

In creating these hierarchies of value, popular music studies (albeit unwittingly) reproduced many of the inequalities that its scholars were committed ideologically to opposing (Click and Kramer, 2007). Not only did youth connections with popular music become a more valued focus of study than connections with older age, but attitudes to musical genre also reflected particularly patriarchal understandings of gender and sexuality. The intervention of feminist approaches from the 1990s onwards exposed many of the ideological subtexts underpinning
not only the music industry but music scholarship itself (Frith and McRobbie, 1990, Whiteley, 1997, Leonard, 2007), suggesting that understandings of popular music were incomplete and limited as a result.

Gender, genre, age and ‘late style’ performance

In the last five years or so, the previously unthinkable has happened and (though youth studies are still dominant) a turn towards ageing has taken place within the academic context for popular music studies. This turn is due not only to pioneering academics in the field facing up to their own ageing process, but also because the iconic musicians and popular music stars that drove many of the key popular music debates (such as David Bowie, The Rolling Stones, Annie Lennox, Madonna) are now all beyond the age of 50 and thus meet the current (2012) World Health Organization (WHO) global definition of an older person. It is also evident that ‘the changing demographics of an ageing society are disrupting previous notions of pop and rock music as being the preserve of youthful artists and consumers’ (Jennings and Gardner, 2012, p. 3). Many of the once youthful pop stars have achieved a longevity of career that was never anticipated, and consequently the core dynamic of rupture (with the past) that was associated with their rise to stardom has now morphed into one of continuum (where their past career and oeuvre informs their present and future).

Pop and rock can be regarded as two of the foundational genres of modern mainstream popular music, and as a result form an important context for the examination of sociocultural attitudes to ageing in popular music as well as the musical performance of older pop and rock stars themselves. These two staple genres are dominated by normative associations about gender and sexuality that disguise the complexity of their construction, performances and consumption. In particular, female performers’ musical skills and creativity are rarely recognized as constituent parts of their success in the same way as male performers’ are (Mayhew, 1999, Click and Kramer, 2007). Gendered performance stereotypes have a significant impact on the ways that ageing performers are read by audiences and the media, as well as on the performance strategies that they pursue as they age. As Hawkins asserts: ‘music is sold on the basis of the pop star’s identity as much as the apparatus of marketing and production linked to the recording industry’ (2002, p. 12), and this is subject to the sociocultural tropes of ageing and ageism at work in the contexts in which the music and the performer are consumed. This becomes incredibly poignant if one considers that, originally, popular music genres such as rock and pop, their performers and their audiences, were not conceptualized as being able to age. Suddenly, the swaggering sexuality of the male rock star’s body and persona (so closely linked to idealized youthful heterosexual masculinity, authenticity and artistic honesty) becomes viewed through the lens of gendered ageist assumptions about physiological and sexual decline. The ageing of female performers is understood as a particularly traumatic process (Kaplan, 1999, Jennings, 2012). Interpreted representationally within dominant discourses of idealized youthful heterosexual feminine attractiveness, older female performance evokes a sexist inflected ageism, one that concentrates on appearance (physical body, style and age-appropriateness) and that can provoke vehement responses of disgust, fear and hatred towards even a well-managed ageing female body if cultural norms of femininity are considered to have been transgressed. For example, as Gorton and Garde-Hansen (2013) argue, since turning 50, one of the most successful female pop stars, Madonna, has been the object of particularly malicious forms of sexualized online ‘trolling’ and ‘body snarking.’

How popular music performers strategize the longevity of their career within the context of ageism and sexism varies, but inevitably involves the negotiation of their contemporary physical and cultural presence within the intertextuality of their performative history and recorded
As Gullette asserts, ‘we are aged more by culture than by chromosomes’ (2004, 101) and a negative cultural perception of ageing has a powerful impact on the ways later life popular musical performances are perceived. Physiological capacities related to ageing, such as vocal capacity, also have an important impact on audience reception. Voices evoke ‘signifying associations’ (Shank, 2006, p. 12) with the performer, and the voice is one of the central elements of the physiological influence on the act of interpretation. Performative late style is therefore constructed as much by the abilities of the voice as it is by other cultural factors. With proper management and care, current research would suggest that the continued practice of singing can help maintain vocal frequency, intensity, range and quality into the seventh decade (Prakup, 2012). Certainly, this is the case for the more mainstream popular music performers such as Shirley Bassey and Tom Jones who work with the support of voice coaches to maintain the authority and integrity of their performances. For the more ‘do-it-yourself’ performers (mostly musicians and song-writers rather than just singers) who defined themselves against pre-rock and roll traditions and who pride themselves on their self-taught creativity (for instance Paul McCartney), the toll on the voice after decades of performance is not always so kind.

Artists with heritages of physically based performances (for example Mick Jagger and Madonna) have prolonged their performance styles through grueling physical fitness regimes (echoing dominant western ideas of successful ageing through effective management of the body). Some other older popular music performers (for instance, Shirley Bassey, Courtney Love) have developed later life performance styles that resist, renegotiate and rebel against age-appropriate expectations (Jennings and Gardner, 2012), whilst others have secured continued commercial success by shifting generic style from contemporary rock and pop to ‘classic’ mainstream (for example Rod Stewart and his move from rock to American Songbook classics). Late style performance is a retrospective, diverse and complex construction with its own critical and ideological take on ageing and creativity (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2012). Thus, in addition to the key referents of age and ageing, critical understandings of late style are informed by both the musical and performative oeuvre that has gone before and the contemporary context of reception.

Life-long popular music practices
The longevity of popular musical careers, production and performance also extends the possibilities of popular musical consumption, fandom and fan practices along the life course. As popular music has technologized into ‘the cloud’ (Wikström, 2009), permitting digital downloads and sharing, the music industry has been forced to diversify in order to pursue new revenue streams (Meier, 2011). Niche programming on radio stations featuring music from different decades has long been a radio staple but this is now extended to the production of niche radio stations (for example The Wireless [Age UK] for older listeners). Live performance is now, however, generally accepted as the place where performers (and the industry) make money. Popular music artists can now perform and have successful international tours in their 60s, 70s and beyond (for instance Paul McCartney, Tom Jones, Leonard Cohen, The Rolling Stones, Grace Jones, Annie Lennox, Petula Clark, Patti Smith). In this respect not only is there an emergent grey market for concert attendance (audiences who have stayed loyal to certain music but now also have the opportunity to see performers they missed when they were younger), but the increasingly mixed demographic for popular music concerts and festivals (including the noticeable intergenerational audience profile of the ’60s, ’70s and ’80s revival pop concert genre) suggests that previous age divisions around music seem also to be dissolving as musical signifiers loosen their direct connection with time and space. With nearly all recorded music now available in the
cloud, the collective embeddedness of musical memories becomes more fragile whilst individual memories remain an ‘embodied, technologically enabled and culturally embedded construction’ (Van Dijck, 2006, p. 3). At this point in the twenty-first century, previous notions of an essential split in tastes between youth and older generations are no longer the case.

The deepest division in musical identities and practices in the west is between those in in their late 70s and older (Connell, 2012) and those in the age groups below. Indeed, as Connell’s ethnographic study of the role of music and music technology in relation to the construction of generational identity suggests, musical identities between contemporary children and parents are much closer than ‘the wider gulf between these children’s grandparents and great grandparents’ (2012, p. 275).

Current research now suggests (Connell, 2012, Forman, 2012, Van Dijck, 2006) that music remains an important symbolic resource as we age and forge our own later life identities. The proliferation in intergenerational connections forged in relation to older people’s choirs (particularly those that sing contemporary popular music) together with the success of related films about the life enrichment offered by such activities, such as in Song for Marion (Williams, 2012), are evidence of popular music’s role in late-life leisure and creative practices.

The music and other cultural industries are now geared up to economically exploit ‘greying audiences’ as much as any other of their target economic groups, but there is currently very little thought devoted to those who sit outside current intergenerational consumption patterns. For those in their late 70s upwards, who personified the ‘radio/wireless’ generation and who saved to buy records when they were precious commodities, adaptation to newer types of technology as formats become outdated (for example records to CDs) becomes increasingly difficult without support. As music has become predominantly downloadable from the cloud, independently accessing their own musical tastes has become more problematic for this group of people. It is crucial that products, training and services are generated to address the wishes and needs (see Hylten-Cavalius, 2012) of those who, at the oldest end of the age spectrum, are the most isolated from the resources to continue constructing meaningful identities through popular music experiences and pleasures. Current lack of consumption is not ‘sufficient grounds for the attribution of irrelevance’ (Forman, 2012, p. 249), especially as continued access to music and associated products are particularly significant in the light of current research that indicates the contribution of music to vitality and well-being in later life.

Conclusion

Music forms part of the bedrock of human cultural life. Technological advances in recording and distribution have generated more and more ways to access and consume all types of music and, certainly in the western world, also to embed it in the fabric of the life course from the moment of birth until the post-mortem rituals of burial, remembrance and commemoration.

The interdisciplinary academic subject area of popular music studies has been slow to engage with the importance of music to people throughout their life course. As the area has matured and its scholars have started to come to terms with their own ageing and also that of their popular music icons, the privileging of youth (at the cost of all other connections with popular music) is slipping as the core focus of research. There is now recognition that popular music, its cultures, performances and fan practices require critical interrogation through an acknowledgement of a continuum of experiences, influences and positions that avoids the false dichotomy of young and old people and older and newer forms of popular music. For those who have grown up with the inheritance of rock and roll, popular music will be a contributing factor in facilitating Gullette’s (2004) dream of a time when we all might ‘feel at home’ at every age in the life course.
References


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Song for Marion (2013) Dir. P.A. Williams, UK/Germany.


