Grey Matter/Literature/Area: *Bucketfull of Brains*, Fanzine Form and Cultural Formation

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Introduction

This article focuses on *Bucketfull* [sic] *of Brains* (aka and henceforth *BoB*, not to be confused with the '80s American music fanzine *The Bob*), a fanzine founded by Nigel Cross in 1979 which only recently (2015) ceased publication, making it a prime candidate for longest continuously running British music fanzine. Drawing upon interviews with founding editor Nigel Cross (1979 - 1984), second editor Jon Storey (1985 – 1995), and regular *BoB* contributor and founder of 'sister' fanzine *Ptolemaic Terrascope* (1989 - 2007) Phil McMullen, the article is primarily concerned with the motivations and work of fanzine editors/writers in documenting the histories and development of interlinked popular musical sub-genres and micro-genres. The network of '70s and '80s fanzine writers and editors under discussion constituted what Raymond Williams' has termed a 'cultural formation' (1976), a concept which will be explored in some depth in due course. In providing various layers of context to elucidate both the place of *BoB* in the history of rock fanzine scholarship, and the reasons for the persistent neglect of such scholarship, the article is also influenced by concepts of literary form and genre developed by Kenneth Burke (1968), Raymond Williams (1976), Franco Moretti (2005) and Terry Eagleton (2010).

As a music publication *BoB* always maintained an intriguingly liminal identity, occupying a grey area between DIY amateurism and a more professional or commercial orientation, and retaining the 'voice' of a zine despite increasingly assuming the 'look' of a magazine. This

liminal identity also extended to its transatlantic focus and its straddling of punk/psychedelic music scenes; to quote a garage rock compilation title, 'mind-expanding punkadelic garage rock' has typically been its stock-in-trade.

[INSERT IMAGE 1]

Figure 1: Bucketfull of Brain logo by underground cartoonist Gilbert Shelton

This transatlantic orientation made *BoB* the 'odd man out' in UK music criticism in the 1980s, a period that predated grunge and alt country. Despite being highly regarded and respected by US musicians, journalists and commentators *BoB* has been largely neglected or ignored by their British counterparts, although it has had a very dedicated readership in this country. *BoB* is often associated with the (neo-psychedelic) US Paisley Underground scene of the '80s, having introduced the UK to West Coast bands like The Dream Syndicate, Rain Parade, True West, and Game Theory.[1] Ironically these bands tended to be as underappreciated regionally and nationally as *Bucketfull of Brains* was in its own country, with bands and zines crowded out by the sheer scale of competition (whether in terms of rock bands in the US or music publications in the UK). As Matt Puicci recalled,

> Rain Parade never did shit in LA, ever. It was England that made us. All I remember is getting issues of *Bucketfull of Brains*, reading them and thinking: 'Wow – these guys get it'. That mattered. (quoted in Hann 2013)

[INSERT IMAGE 2]

Figure 2: Issue 9 of Bucketfull of Brains, 1984. Layout: Christine Sherwen.

[1] The late Scott Miller of Game Theory recalled of his song *Like a Girl Jesus*, 'I distinctly remember my intent was to get it put out as a flexi disc in *Bucketfull of Brains* magazine' (quoted in Borack 2007, 52).

Issue 9 of *BoB* contained a Long Ryders cover (see Figure 2) and extensive interview with frontman Sid Griffin before any of their releases were licensed in the UK, and it is worth noting that Andrew Lauder, Andy Childs and Jake Riviera of the British label Demon Records (who were to release the band's early work on their Zippo imprint) discovered the band as a result of reading fanzine articles by David Bragg and Nigel Cross, underlining the important taste-making role of fanzines. *BoB* also featured the first European interview with R.E.M, by John Platt, in December 1984; in a further coup issue 11 featured an exclusive R.E.M. flexi-disc.[2] Nevertheless, when asked about the attitude of the British weekly music press to *BoB* during the 1980s, Nigel Cross opined '[W]e were pariahs – nobody was interested. But in America they couldn't get enough of us' (2018). An *NME* review (14 December 1985) of an EP (*Northern Line*) by the late David Roback's group Opal (later to evolve into Mazzy Star) lends some credence to Cross' characterisation; feigning surprise at the excellence of the release, the anonymous yet conceited reviewer strikes a contrast with the 'appalling' Rain Parade (from which Roback had recently departed), which supposedly had been 'offloaded onto our palettes' by 'a load of shoddy hippies'![3]

There is, however, an important scholarly exception to the neglect of *BoB* outside of its immediate fanbase, in the form of an important intervention by Chris Atton (2010), which uses the latter-day *BoB* (circa 2000s, when it was edited by Nick West) as a case study to

[2] R.E.M. remained friends and supporters of *BoB* over the years, for example giving Jon Storey one of only two magazine interviews the band did during a trip to Europe in March 1991 (as well as free tickets to their two-night secret gig at The Borderline in London, where they played under the pseudonym Bingo Hand Job) as low-key promotion for their breakthrough Warners album *Out of Time*. Peter Buck and Mike Mills also joined Robyn Hitchcock, Andy Metcalfe, Morris Windsor (all ex-Soft Boys) and Peter Holsapple (ex-dB's) in gifting *BoB* songs for a flexi-disc under the pseudonym Nigel and the Crosses (in tribute to Nigel Cross).

[3] For scanned clipping and discussion, see post in the Facebook group 'Ultimate Paisley Underground 1980s Psychedelic / Neo-Psychedelic Scene' - https://www.facebook.com/groups/363649013667775/permalink/2492745400758115/ (accessed 24 March 2020).

demonstrate the limitations of the homological approach of the cultural studies tradition in the scholarly literature on fanzines. Whilst this article develops and extends Atton's argument in undertaking a more detailed examination of *BoB* as a liminal and idiosyncratic example of the form, it is also important to provide some historical context regarding literary forms. In particular, we will be concerned here with relationships and intersections between fanzines and wider print culture, such as the underground press, small (circulation) magazines and semi-professional fanzines ('prozines'). This should serve to situate *BoB* within a broader cultural formation, both abiding by and complementing Atton's focus on *genre* formation as the result of cultural congruence between writers, musicians and readers.

Zine Theory and Form

Atton characterises late-period *BoB* as a periodical with a marked interest in songwriting craft and genre formation, 'preferring – even expecting – its favoured artists to learn from and improve upon the work of their predecessors' (2010: 525). Whilst Atton is right to distinguish such an attitude from mere nostalgia, it is worth stating that *BoB* was never characterised or stymied by 'schoolmasterly' value judgements regarding notions of progression, attuned as it was to the distinctive qualities of emerging talent. Admitting in issue 6 (1983) that '*BoB* is guilty of always making comparisons with other bands', Cross claims (in an article on Rain Parade) that 'the comparisons are there just to trigger your nerve endings and memory cells to get you in the mood'. This recalls film scholar Rick Altman's observation that genres have increasingly taken on 'a pseudo-memorial function'; they 'count on [spectator] memory to work their magic' (1999: 191). Despite the fact that it

was written as a celebration of electronic, industrial and futuristic music, the following quote from Jon Savage's 'New Musick' piece for *Sounds* (26 November 1977) could almost have been a credo for *BoB*:

> Your roots are showing, honey. Right now it's Iggy/Ramones/glam/R&B/1960s garage, to simplify. Major untapped (re)sources for the future: the obscurer side of the psychedelic explosion. (Savage 1997: 37)

BoB and its sister zine *Ptolemaic Terracope* charted the continuing fall-out from the psychedelic explosion in the form of critical and historical articles; comprehensive discographies; and profiles of artists unknown, underrated and unsung. This scholarship, along with *BoB*'s evolution over time into an increasingly professional publication (or prozine), is certainly germane to Atton's overarching argument that, despite its longevity, a prozine like *BoB* may have been overlooked partly due to a bias toward punk fanzines and the DIY aesthetic in academic work and popular histories. As Grimes and Wall summarise,

> There is a tendency in the literature to produce an overly determining and fundamentally structuralist reading of punk, and in fanzines (as with other activities) visual design is seen as the primary language, culture an anthropological activity of display, and class the primary definer of social agency. (2015: 290)

Sheila Liming, whilst celebrating the transgressive reading practices many zines necessitated - 'zinesters do not want to tell you how to read their zine' (2010: 137) - has cautioned against subcultural interpretations of fanzines. She believes such interpretations 'miss the point of zines and return them to a discourse of frivolity and youthful angst…instead of rationalizing them as a site of rich significance in the history of print communication and public sphere formation' (2010: 123). Accordingly, Liming endeavours to build a case both

for their 'discernible traditional *and* traditionally anomalous nature in the context of print history' (2010: 123).

In doing so Liming alludes to the way in which fanzines echoed the early print culture in which 'the functions of typefounder, printer, publisher, editor, and bookseller are little differentiated; the same man or the same firm usually combines all or most of these crafts and professions' (Steinberg [1955] 2017: 20). It is salutary to note, however, that what Steinberg refers to here, in his classic history of printing, is the era of the *printer-scholar* (during the 15th and 16th Centuries). The abiding interest in what we might instead term the figure of the printer-pamphleteer in subcultural interpretations of fanzines has perhaps led to a neglect of the scholar figure/role (despite the academic basis of such interpretations). Liming is keen to emphasise that the creator of a zine is far closer to Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'author as producer' to an author in the traditional sense, in the way that they solicit, borrow or appropriate material from other creators or sources (137):

> Traditional reading methods – developed and rigidified by solidly bourgeois institutions like the public school system – suddenly become useless, and zine readers are invited to step closer to the line that separates producer and consumer in a format that celebrates not professionalism and polish, but, rather amateurism and anarchy. (137)

This is, of course, a crucial aspect of fanzine culture, and it is also important to note that zines have thrown down the gauntlet to readers in the form of provocation as well as an invitation to participate. Radway (2011: 141) asserts that:

> Wary of the dominant culture's power to co-opt, zinesters strove to resist commodification formally by practicing an aesthetic that was decidedly not reader-

> friendly. They produced collaged pamphlets with chaotic, cut-and-paste layouts that defy linear scanning, sometimes resist traditional narrative sequencing, and even refuse pagination altogether.

That fanzines with wildly differing preoccupations and politics can share such seemingly impenetrable aesthetic practices tends to reinforce the literary critic Kenneth Burke's notion of 'significant form' – that in most works 'we find formal devices or contrivances which impart emphasis regardless of their subject' (1968: 135):

> [F]orm is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite. This satisfaction – so complicated is the human mechanism – at times involves a temporary set of frustrations, but in the end these frustrations prove to be simply a more involved kind of satisfaction, and furthermore serve to make the satisfaction of fulfilment more intense. (1968: 31)

This explains the fact that the focus of much work on fanzines has been on the form rather than the substance of fanzine production (Worley et al. 2018: 5). It does, however, beg the question of whether the satisfactions of an 'anti-design' aesthetic (Atton 2010: 518), in tandem with ubiquitous concerns about commodification, have tended to perpetuate a distinction between zines and prozines that taint the latter with denigrated qualities of professionalism and polish (to use Liming's words). Contrary to Liming's intent, the reproduction of such distinctions can arguably also direct attention away from the relationships and intersections between fanzines and wider print culture.

Fanzine Scholarship

In the UK context this has tended to obscure the importance of some small circulation rock magazines of the '70s, many of which were inspired by the pioneering example of *ZigZag* (1969 - 1986). Although it has been rightly cited by Ian Marchant both as following in the footsteps of the underground newspaper *IT* (*International Times*) and as 'apocrypha' to the *NME*'s 'gospel' (2018: 165, 368), it is important to note that a need was felt for an alternative music publication that was 'free of the pseudo-politics and sexual liberation posturings that characterised *Oz*, for example' (Cross 1981: 3).

In actual fact, the founder of *ZigZag*, Pete Frame, originally intended it as a British counterpart to *Rolling Stone*, which had few outlets in Britain and Europe at the time, due to the difficulties of distribution for alternative magazines (Cross 1981: 3). From the outset Frame sought to attain distribution and advertising on a national scale – although this was not fully achieved until 1973, when *ZigZag* began to be published by Charisma Records in 1973, and built up a readership of about 20,000 as a proper monthly magazine (Cross 1981: 3). By contrast, what came to be widely known as fanzines were somewhat haphazardly circulated at record stores and gigs or mailed out to subscribers (Houghton 2011: n. pag.). Whilst thus fairly conventional in terms of format and distribution, *ZigZag* nevertheless gave coverage to underground scenes and overlooked artists. When *ZigZag* launched Britain was undergoing a blues revival, powered by hard rock bands like Led Zeppelin and Fleetwood Mac, the dominance of which induced Pete Frame to shine a light on then-obscure artists like Fairport Convention and Captain Beefheart (Cross 1981: 5). In attuning readers to underground culture, many were inspired to themselves 'get into print'. As Mick Houghton recently recalled,

> ZigZag motivated a number of other rather more single minded individuals who diligently put their own magazines together in their spare time: Pete O'Brien's Omaha Rainbow, Bert Muirhead's Hot Wacks, Andy Childs' Fat Angel, John Platt's Comstock Lode, Nick Ralph and Steve Burgess' Dark Star and a late 70's entry, Nigel Cross's Bucketful Of Brains, each one exploring its own niche, whether it was the beat poets, Greenwich Village singer songwriters, Bay Area bands, psychedelia, power pop or, in the case of Pete O'Brien, a fixation with John Stewart. (Houghton 2010: n. pag.)[4]

For the first four years of its existence *ZigZag* struggled to maintain alternative coverage to that of the weekly music press, with regular monthly publication hindered by perennial financial troubles. Some of the small magazines mentioned by Houghton, such as *Supersnazz* and *Fat Angel*, actually sprang up to fill gaps in publication (Cross 1981: 3), with some writers subbing for multiple publications (for example, Dave Neale AKA 'Pippin' edited *Supersnazz* and wrote for early *ZigZag* as well as for *Fat Angel*). By the mid-1970s there were at least 30 fanzines in Great Britain, all operating at different levels of intention and success (Watts 1976). Jon Savage has referred to this as a 'forgotten era of music publishing' which 'would go fanatically into sixties music like The Kinks, Creation and other hard mod pop that has had a much bigger influence on punk than has ever been recognised', and which ultimately was an inspiration for his own fanzine (*London's Outrage*) (quoted in Taylor 2010, 58). Although some of these fanzines were professionally produced and neatly designed, they have nevertheless been deemed to have 'looked the same and [to have

[4] It is immediately evident that all these editors are male – in recognition of this gender bias in rock fanzines, Nigel Cross noted in an interview with the present author that as his stewardship of *BoB* developed he was pleased to be able to include the contributions of a number of young female writers, including the Gomez sisters (Stevie, Geordie and Karen) from France, Mollie Shragge from San Francisco and the UK's Lynne Aldridge.

been] assembled in the same way as those that came after' (Taylor 2010: 15). Certainly, many punk fanzines would come to utilize affordable offset litho printing and anarchic artwork in much the same way as these earlier fanzines.

Although it is easy to pigeonhole *BoB* as a tribune of the mid-to-late '80s garage rock revival - largely due to the direction it took during this period under the stewardship of second editor Jon Storey – Lindsay Hutton's *Next Big Thing* (founded in 1977) was probably the zine that covered this field with the greatest humour and zeal. It is more accurate to regard *BoB* as the continuation of a flurry of ground-breaking zine scholarship that bridged the gap (especially in terms of taste communities) between the alternative press of the long sixties and the fanzines of the punk and post-punk period. Another 'latecomer' zine, the semi-legendary *Comstock Lode* (1977-1982) illuminates this cultural lineage, in combining scholarly articles on the Beats, the Greenwich Village music scene, and the freakier fringes of the UK and US folk revival, with early profiles of US avant pop bands like the dB's (see Figure 3), and regular updates on British punk stalwarts The Damned.

[INSERT IMAGE 3] [INSERT IMAGE 4]

Figure 3: Comstock Lode No. 10 (1982), edited and published by John Platt

Figure 4: Ptolemaic Terrascope, Vol. 4, No. 4, Spring 1994. Layout and artwork by R. M. 'Cyke' Bancroft

John Platt actually insisted that *Comstock Lode* was not a fanzine, and Nigel Cross noted in his 1981 survey of fanzines that 'its style and spirit owe more to small circulation literary magazines and its contents do not cater for the average rock fan' (1981: 11). An even later arrival to the party was *Ptolemaic Terrascope*, founded in 1989 by Phil McMullen, Nick

Saloman (aka psych artist Bevis Frond) and artist/musician Cyke Bancroft. In an interview with the current author, McMullen was explicit about the zine's connection with these earlier small magazines:

> To me the Terrascope, founding that, was all about trying to pay tribute to those people and those magazines, and as many of those writers as possible I got to contribute in the early days…a real mismash of people… (2019).

Although it was not as devoted to detailed music scholarship as *Comstock Lode* and *Ptolemaic Terrascope*, *BoB* had a similar orientation - to use the past in order to retrieve something found presently lacking. *BoB* also shared the tendency of all of these publications to cherish particular American groups at a time when they had been forgotten, ignored or despised in their home country. This was something of a wider tendency, as albums by important '60s bands like The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band, Kaleidoscope, The Prunes, HP Lovecraft, and Human Beinz were reissued in Europe in the early '80s, long before being rediscovered in the States. The ability of a fanzine like *BoB* to adeptly cover bands both old and new, however, was lost on most UK commentators and journalists. Those in search of the modern and avant-garde tended to be disparaging about the 'retro' orientation of the emergent psychedelic/garage scenes of the '80s. As one regular contributor BoB complained, 'What the hacks from the music weeklies never seem to understand is that you can play in older styles and use that for a springboard to doing [sic] something new'.[5] Others regarded what they saw to be the retro orientation of the new Paisley Underground bands as despoiling the memory of 'true psychedelia' (Cope 2005: 41).

[5] Charles P. Lamey, 'Passing the Acid Test: Plasticland', *Bucketfull of Brains*, Issue 7, 1983-4.

But why are these pioneering zines still relatively unknown? One possible reason, to return to Atton's argument, is the dominance of the homological approach – 'the assumption that we can read back from the aesthetics and writing of a fanzine to a particular representation of a social experience by fans' (2010: 158) – which has often meant the exclusion of fanzines not allied to the punk DIY aesthetic or a particular social experience.

> The special pleading for punk as the progenitor of contemporary fanzine production makes it difficult to consider – and seems to exclude – people who produce fanzines that deal with other musical forms, whose publications are more clearly professional or which have relationships with the mainstream that are not straightforwardly 'oppositional'. (Atton 2010: 517)

David E. James has adeptly characterised punk fanzines as 're-enacting early punk's independent methods of production'; 'the means by which punk wrote itself, the place where the social vocabularies and ideological formulations that constituted it were socially constructed, contested and clarified' (James 1996: 210, 211). The homological approach is eminently suited to an exploration of such fanzines, but not all fanzines have been so concerned to distribute authorship throughout the subculture at large (James 1996: 2010) or to take a stance against the social relations of (mass) production.

We can develop Atton's argument further here by drawing on Raymond Williams' concept of cultural formation (1976) – a formal or informal association of individuals engaged in some type of cultural production which situates them in particular relations with broader trends in society (Brooker and Thacker 2009, 18). Brooker and Thacker have demonstrated the utility of the concept in studying the 'loosely organized and short-lived independent groupings of friends and associates' typical of 'little magazines' (2009; see also Corbett and

Thacker 2008). Williams proposes that the study of such cultural formations require us to attend not only to their internal organization, but also to their external relations. He distinguishes between three types of external relations: 'specializing' (which seeks to support work in a particular medium or style); 'alternative' (which provides for forms of work excluded by present institutions); and 'oppositional' (which directly opposes existing institutions and the social and political conditions which uphold them) (see Brooker and Thacker 2009, 19).

This typology seems eminently suited to the study of fanzines. The cultural formation that gravitated around *ZigZag* tended to adopt 'specializing' and 'alternative' relations, to be fairly reclusive in terms of its relations to the wider world, and somewhat mealy-mouthed in its criticism of the music industry. Hence Neil Taylor alleges that they fulfilled some of the services that the best punk fanzines would come to provide but tended 'to lack the public-spiritedness and largely toed the music-business line' (2010: 15). There were, however, other rock fanzines with similar musical taste that were more vocal, oppositional and outward facing. A pre-eminent example is *Who Put the Bomp* (later shortened to *Bomp!*), an influential American fanzine founded in 1970 by Greg Shaw, which Simon Reynolds has termed 'the major spawning ground for punk ideology' (2012: 241). Shaw's editorials over a number of years chronicle the development of a theory of rock fandom which at times expressed such zeal that it threatened to turn Williams' typology into more of a continuum:

> I began to dream that if enough people were only exposed to fanzines and the writing of people who had been inspired by the great rock of the '50s and '60s, maybe through mail-order channels the readers of all these fanzines could collectively form enough of a minority power bloc to begin demanding the music

> they liked from the industry, and directly supporting those who were making it….I never dreamed how far it would go, with bands who had started as fanzine readers, with the idea of doing 13th Floor Elevators and Count Five songs for the sheer fun of it, being hailed in '76 as the leaders of a new avant-garde movement! (Shaw, reproduced in Farren and Shaw 2007: 188)

William's 'cultural formation', then, might represent a useful alternative to the homological approach to fanzines in allowing us to consider the motivations of fandoms that 'do not want to semiologically resist through rituals' (Huq, quoted in Atton 2010, 520). Revisiting Shaw's rock fandom theory illustrates not only that the tradition of fanzine writer/editor as music scholar has been neglected, but also the strong historical links between record collecting, fanzines (and fanzine collecting), and DIY music-making. Roger Armstrong, manager of the famous Rock On stall in Soho Market and founder (with Ted Carroll) of the independent label Chiswick Records, recalled how the second-hand stall gave the kids who were in the first punk rock bands access to music they wouldn't otherwise have heard (quoted in Savage 2009, 141). As well as contemporary imports that were otherwise impossible to acquire, this included the music of the 'sixties garage scene', leading to a history of cover versions, 'from Flamin' Groovies numbers through to Standells and Chocolate Watchband…' (ibid.).

A pioneering figure in fanzine culture who had begun creating zines as a science fiction fan in the 1950s, Greg Shaw played a central role in validating, documenting and making available exactly these kinds of music – psychedelia, garage rock, punk and power pop – the kinds that *BoB* came to specialize in. In an interview with the present author, Nigel Cross

related how it was a chance meeting with Shaw at a Flamin' Groovies gig in Liverpool on 12 November 1976 that actually led him on a path to begin writing about music:

> [The Flamin' Groovies] came on stage and said 'Look, we're really sorry, but The Damned aren't going to appear tonight because they don't want to be [seen] with a bunch of hippies! …So we're going to put Mike Wilhelm on…' [as support act]. Because Mike had just joined the Groovies, and I loved The Charlatans [the 1960s San Francisco band Wilhelm had been a member of] … It was Eric's in Liverpool, and, you know, it was the punk era, '76. And I was clapping, and hollering, you know, and there was this guy next to me. After Wilhelm had done this set, he said…'So you know about The Charlatans, you know about Mike Wilhelm?' I said 'Yeah…' It turned out this guy was Greg Shaw [then manager of the Flamin' Groovies] … Later they said, 'Are you going back to the hotel?'. I usually steer clear of all that kind of stuff. But I went back, and it was just fantastic. When they came to Leeds in '78 I knew them, and I thought…I'm going to try my hand at writing something [for the first time], so I wrote a review of the gig…for this little Leeds alternative newspaper… (Cross 2018)

When he came to start the fanzine, Cross based its name on the (unused) title of a projected Flamin' Groovies album, *A Bucket of Brains* – 'it was my tip of the hat to that night in Liverpool' (ibid.). This anecdote links us back to Atton's article, which notes the danger of (scholarly) work on fanzines 'essentializing production and creativity at the level of class and "resistance", ignoring personal histories, interactions, or trajectories' (2010: 519).

A decade earlier, in 1966, the teenage Shaw, along with his friend David Harris, had begun documenting the local San Francisco music scene in a fanzine, *Mojo Navigator Rock 'n' Roll*

News, which eventually grew into a 32-page colour magazine, featuring interviews with various West Coast psychedelic bands. *Mojo Navigator* and (Paul Williams') *Crawdaddy* were 'publications *by and for the fans*' or 'peer group writing' in the words of Chet Flippo (Ginsburg 1979: 30, emphasis in original). A mutually supportive 'peer group' orientation was also highly evident within the flurry of periodicals inspired by *ZigZag*:

> *ZigZag* was a great clearing house, and they'd say 'Oh well if you like *ZigZag* why not check out *Supersnazz*, or check out *Fat Angel*…' So, you know, by 1972, when I was going to college, I was subscribing to all these magazines, and also getting to know the people…a network of fanzine writers. (Cross 2018)

With the emphasis in the literature on the fanzine as a site for the rejection of the bourgeois model of the individual author, such networks can come into focus. But as factors like communication/coherence (i.e. legibility in design and accessibility of writing), content (e.g. scholarship) and coverage (e.g. diversity in terms of musical genres) are sometimes devalued, so are the types of publications that prioritised these aspects.

The Cultural Politics of Music Fanzines

BoB shared many of the same musical touchstones as the hugely influential punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue* (US bands like Television and the Flamin' Groovies). But whilst *BoB* was closely informed by punk (especially the New York scene), new wave and other subterranean trends, it retained an interest in a variety of 'roots' elements often eschewed by those more radical or subcultural elements within music scenes, punk fanzines and the weekly music press, 'intent as they were on artifice, newness, aesthetic orthodoxy, and the destruction of

tradition' (Svenonius 2015: 58). This was evident even in *BoB*'s coverage of new music. For example, in issue 2 of *BoB* Cross delved into the R&B influences to be found in the recently released Elvis Costello LP *Get Happy!!*:

> When I played it through for the first time I kept slipping into the frame of mind where I thought that it was a Brinsley's ['pub rock' group Brinsley Schwartz] album with its Bob Andrews/Garth Hudson influenced smoking organ sound: I suddenly remembered how close the Brinsley's had been to this in 1973/4. Do you remember their beautiful version of the Judy Clay/William Bell song *Private Number*? U.A. [United Artists] if there is life left in your burnt-out hulk why not put out that as a single sometime or how about F-Beat doing it? It's not a put down to say that Steve Naïve is aiming for that Bob Andrews sound…On several songs the Thomas brothers come over as capable and funky as any of those shit hot Motown session rhythm sections such as on 'High Fidelity' with its Four Tops type arrangement…Hey up, they do [sic] a bundle on this at Wigan Casino![6]

There is a general consensus that the idea of punk as 'Year Zero' was pretence or rhetoric. As Jon Savage reflected in 1983, 'punk always had a retro consciousness – deliberately ignored in the cultural Stalinism that was going on at the time – which was pervasive yet controlled' (Savage 1997: 145). A useful shorthand to describe a desire to lay waste to the bloated, complacent and conformist music industry or 'establishment', it also concealed borrowings from '70s glam and pub rock, '60s psych, surf, garage and fuzz, and '50s rock 'n' roll. But it is possible that this rhetoric in some ways had a deleterious impact on 'amateur' music criticism – despite gains in energy, passion and commitment there was a frustrating

[6] Nigel Cross, 'The Return of a Man Called Elvis Costello', *A Bucketfull of Brains*, Spring 1980, p. 15.

present-mindedness and insularity in many punk fanzines. David Ginsburg noted in 1979 (the year that Nigel Cross founded *BoB*), 'many of the new-wave fanzines are marred by shortsightedness and either ignorance of or complete disinterest in anything preceding English punk circa 1976' (35).

The above extract also demonstrates that the original fanzine incarnation of *BoB* featured writing that combined a refreshingly personal tone and considerable depth of musical knowledge, as well as a certain irreverence (e.g. towards record labels). When Nigel Cross relinquished control of the fanzine to Jon Storey, and *BoB* developed into a more professional publication featuring a significant amount of advertising, these qualities began to dwindle, and it would come to receive criticism from some quarters for rarely printing negative or caustic album reviews. But *BoB* nevertheless managed to steer a course in refraining from the pugnacious and vitriolic excesses of fanzine writers and the more iconoclastic writers for the 'weeklies', whilst endeavouring (albeit not always successfully) to avoid the type of 'gushing reviews' that are generally symptomatic of fandom. In conversation with the present author, both Storey and Cross expressed the view that 'life's too short' to run negative reviews when there was so much good music out there not receiving airplay or column inches.

In this they shared the outlook of Greg Shaw, who generally 'took the attitude that it was better to try and get people excited about stuff that would lead to better things than to concentrate on what was bad' (compiled in Farren and Shaw 2007: 188). *BoB*'s 'positive orientation' reflected ideals of discovery and sustainability (of artists, scenes, labels and other fanzines), and the desire to preserve and consolidate some of the more obscure or

specialised musical strains that had emerged following the psychedelic and punk explosions. To again quote Shaw, this time writing in issue 9 of *BoB* (in 1984),

> [R]ock's impending garage community is…an unrelenting coalition of every splinter group opposed to the homogenization of culture and unwilling to deny the rock and roll tradition…Short-sighted critics may dismiss psychedelia in the same breath as Merseypop, garage fuzz, surfing, Mods, rockabilly revivalists, doo-woppers; but as narrow-based as they all are, I take the view that they represent protective bastions for some of music's most sublime achievements, and if the past isn't to be enshrined in dull history books but kept alive as brilliant threads in the ongoing tapestry, there's not one we can afford to lose.[7]

This is a useful statement to exemplify the ideological nature of fanzines, in challenging the critical orthodoxy or mainstream tastes that have marginalised 'their' culture (Atton 2013, 170). Given their shared emphasis on low barriers to participation, fanzines and garage rock have an elective affinity as forms of DIY cultural production, especially if we accept Michael Hicks' classification of (early) garage rock as avant-garde, in resisting bourgeois conventions and the deindividualization imposed by mass culture (2000, 26-7).

Motivations

Fanzines like *Fat Angel* and *BoB* struggled to keep afloat on a shoe-string budget and issues often came out on an irregular basis, relying as they did almost exclusively on one individual editor, holding down a day job. But as they were far removed from the hype and rivalry that

[7] Greg Shaw, 'The Eyes of Mind: A Glimpse Behind the Looking Glass', *Bucketfull of Brains*, Issue 9, undated, p 23.

characterised the established music press, they were able to specialize and concentrate on music history and genre formation to a high degree. This has been conducive to the study of rock music 'not as a monolithic style (as is common in rock journalism…), but as a montage of closely interrelated micro-styles (Hochhauser 2000, 524).

Some candid reflections on writing for fanzines can be found in a feature by Clive Anderson in *Fat Angel* (issue 14 in Winter 1976), which encapsulates Simon Frith's idea of 'genre pleasures' (as 'socially constructed') (Frith 1998, 91). By that time Anderson had gained some attention as the main contributor of features on Black music for the short-lived but highly influential magazine *Let it Rock!* (published 1972 – 1975, see Laing 2010: 458). Perhaps alluding to his recent experiences of writing for a professional publication, Anderson reflected that the best thing about writing for *Fat Angel* was a sense of relaxation and pleasure; 'there's time to think without the pressure for deadlines or the spectre of corruption loitering in the wake of advertising space to be sold.' He continued,

> Critics are neither Pope's insects in amber nor Olympian judges bending loftily from the crowds. At best they are cartographers, relating the particular to the whole, informing where possible, but above all communicating their specialised enthusiasms. And they should never be intimidated, seduced, bought. Perhaps the last is the most prevalent danger because, knowingly or otherwise, all critics are paid, at least in terms of albums, and end up writing some kind of advertising copy, no matter how impartial.[8]

[8] Clive Anderson, 'Forgotten Songs and Unsung Heroes (Off the Beaten Track with Clive Anderson)', *Fat Angel*, Issue 14, Winter 1976, unpaginated.

In filling gaps created by the shortcomings or biases of the established weekly papers, British music fanzines have been described as a 'corrective arm' to them (Watts 1976), and this corresponds both to William's 'specializing' and 'alternative' cultural formations. Fanzines were of course able to take full advantage of their freedom from the commercial, editorial or institutional pressures occasionally felt by 'professional' music journalists. In his (punk) era-defining *NME* article 'The Titanic Sails at Dawn' (19 June 1976) Mick Farren admitted that 'even to get this piece into print it is necessary to use the resources of a giant corporation, and [to] adapt one's approach accordingly' (reprinted 2013). As a writer who had come up from the underground press, Farren was particularly mindful of the corporate structures of professional publications and their parasitic relationship to the body politic of the music industry. Greg Shaw has noted that *Bomp!* was an outlet for rock critics like Lester Bangs, Dave Marsh and Charlie Gillett, 'who were writing for magazines like *Rolling Stone* and were limited in what they could say in places like that'.[9] In *Bomp!* they were writing for the kind of 'hardcore fans' who became active participants in punk scenes. Ginsberg (1979: 30) states that, as in the case of fire, there are three things which in combination give rise to fanzines:

> The first requirement, the 'fuel', is obviously the music itself. If there were nothing significant happening musically there would be nothing to discuss in fanzines. The second requirement, the 'heat', is the interest and enthusiasm of fans […] And the third requirement, the 'air' (but in this case, in reverse), is the lack of an established

[9] Quoted in Paul Ricketts, 'Greg Shaw: The Story of Mojo Navigator News, Who Put the Bomp and Voxx Records', *Unhinged*, Issue 6, Spring 1990, unpaginated.

> forum. If the 'prozines' (i.e. professional magazines) adequately covered the music that fans are interested in, there would be no need for fans to do it themselves.

Nigel Cross' feeling that, at the time of the ascendance of synthesizer music and 'New Pop', there were many great guitar bands not receiving sufficient attention and/or receiving unwarranted critical backlash, was his general motivation for starting *BoB*. But there was also a specific 'spark' which initiated the fire. In 1979 Ian Penman had written a scathing review of the Soft Boys' debut album *A Can of Bees* in the *NME* (5th May). What Cross was driven to do, in response, was to try to generate more support for the fledgling group, who would come to spearhead a psychedelic revival – and to give exposure to many other bands similarly deserving of recognition.

Conclusion

The *Children of Nuggets* Rhino 4-CD box set (released in 2005) - which features an essay by Nigel Cross, and which is akin to an encapsulation of *BoB*'s taste during its first 16 years under the stewardship of Cross and Storey (the set covers the years 1976 to 1995) - covers a gamut of musical styles and influences, with bands drawing upon or exemplifying folk-rock, surf music, pub rock, rockabilly, the British Invasion, psychedelic rock, and punk. There is no doubt that *BoB*'s eclecticism mirrored that of the garage rock revival at its best. The fact that the garage revival lasted all this time, whereas the original mid-'60s garage period had only lasted about four years, surely demonstrated that garage rock filled a need that was not being met by mainstream popular music of the '80s and '90s (Bovey 2019, 160). But it also demonstrated that the scene was characterised by the kind of healthy balance – or productive tension – between 'tradition (i.e. strict adherence to revivalist stylistic

parameters) and innovation', which Tamara Livingston has posited as essential for music revivals to thrive (Livingston, quoted in Traber 2017, 39). Earlier the ideal or principle of sustainability - of artists, scenes, labels and other fanzines – was cited as a fundamental motivation of fanzine editors such as Greg Shaw and Nigel Cross. If we accept the idea of music cultures as analogous to environmental ecosystems then we can regard these elements as fundamentally connected, coexistent and mutually dependent:

> Although each world [of music] may seem strange at first, all are organized, purposeful, and coherent. Each world can be regarded as an ecological system, with the forces that combine to make up the music culture (ideas, social organization, repertoires, movement) in a dynamic equilibrium. A change in any part of the ecosystem affects the whole of it. (Titon and Slobin, quoted in Keogh 2013, 4)

Fanzine editors exemplify nicely the idea of music ecologists, seeking to 'justify the protection of certain musical subspecies as though they had intrinsic worth and a right to survival' (Keogh 2013, 6). The example of Greg Shaw suggests that the efforts of 'music ecologists' could have an impact – in this case on the diversity and longevity of the garage revival, and on our understanding of rock history.[10] Patrick Lundborg has observed that the garage punk wave of the 1980s was built from the twin foundations of 'comps' - indie-released compilations of vintage tracks, such as *Pebbles* (a series inaugurated and issued by

[10] As a record label (Bomp and Voxx) founder and sometime industry executive and band manager, Shaw was far more closely involved in the music industry than the majority of fanzine writers/editors. In this country Andy Childs is notable in terms of transitioning between fanzine writing/editing (Childs spent much of the 1970s editing and writing for *Fat Angel* and *ZigZag*) and record label management (F-Beat/Demon/Edsel/Zippo and Rykodisc).

Shaw) and *Back From the Grave* - and 'zines', cemented by the frequent overlap between reissue labels and fanzine editors.[11]

An ecological or biological framework is also useful for thinking about genre formation – Franco Moretti, for example, borrows a term from evolutionary theory to suggest that the history of the novel should be viewed not as a linear trajectory but as a 'diversity spectrum' comprising multiple variants undergoing rhizomatic processes of change, fusion and sometimes extinction (2005). Importantly, Moretti points out that literary and cultural forms, unlike biological species, can move freely through time, reactivating earlier modes and reconnecting with distant relatives and ancestors. In this context it is fitting that Kim Fowley dubbed (sci-fi enthusiast) Shaw 'the H. G. Wells of rock and roll'![12]

I noted earlier that, given their shared emphasis on low barriers to participation, fanzines and garage rock have an elective affinity as forms of DIY cultural production. It is also worth noting, in conclusion, that *BoB* also had a similar elective affinity with 'college rock' in the United States, giving voluminous coverage to bands and artists that typified the genre and taste community, such as R.E.M., Robyn Hitchcock, The Feelies, The Fleshtones, The Church and Hoodoo Gurus. Like the participatory college radio stations, *BoB* always saw the promulgation of lesser-heard groups and genres as its responsibility or mission. As we have seen, 'filling a gap' in this manner was the prime reason for the existence of fanzines in the

[11] Nigel Cross, for example, played a pivotal role in the release on Cherry Red of *Before the Dream Faded*, a compilation of material from The Misunderstood, a 'lost' US psych band that were heavily endorsed by John Peel in the late '60s. Released in 1982 as the 'new psychedelia' revival dawned, the album had a significant impact on a new generation of bands, alongside these comps. Cross' liner notes were based on an article he wrote on the band for issue 3 of *BoB*.

[12] See Pierre Perone, obituary of Greg Shaw, The Independent, 28 October 2004. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/greg-shaw-30743.html (accessed 24 March 2020).

first place (Ginsberg 1979: 30), in an analogue era when scribes and DJs, rather than algorithms, were the prime conduit for fan 'discovery'.

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