THE LATE VOICE
Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music

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Draft version of the Introduction.

Introduction

This book had its genesis in a variety of times, places and experiences, some more easily discernible than others from the distance of the present. When choosing musical case studies for my doctoral thesis on loss, memory and nostalgia in popular song in late 2003, I became interested in exploring the work of Nina Simone, who had died earlier that year. Simone’s death, and the flurry of attention her life and work received in its wake, helped to plant in my mind her potential as an artist to study further, but of equal importance was the recognition that Simone would be an ideal case study for exploring the themes of my thesis. For one thing, the obituaries invariably attested to the fact that Simone had been absent from the scene for years (not strictly true, but true enough for the kinds of life narratives and historical frameworks that obituary writers find appealing); my thesis was about absence in the form of loss, memory and nostalgia, so this seemed apt. More than this, however, was a sense of fascination that I had long held for Simone’s later work. By the time of her death I had been a fan of her music for some years, during which time I had absorbed her classic material of the 1960s and had, like many others, fixed her to a particular historical moment and to a socio-cultural purpose, that of spokeswoman of the civil rights movement.

But this knowledge lay in tension with other knowledge and experience I had of Simone’s music. Although, like many people of my generation, I had first become aware of Simone with the reissue in the mid-1980s of her 1957
recording ‘My Baby Just Cares for Me’, my first serious commitment to her work came some years later with the purchase of a record, the 1977 album Baltimore. Because I came to know this album a few years before hearing her more explicitly political work of the 1960s, I first encountered a Simone who was twenty years into her professional recording career and who had spent much of the 1970s out of sight and sound of the record-buying public. I discovered that Baltimore had been a comeback album of sorts and, while it had been critically well received, was not considered canonical work. Simone remained, in the popular imagination and in the historical account, an icon of the 1960s; anything else was ‘late work’. Baltimore was late work because, even though Simone was only forty-four at the time of recording the album, it came after a lengthy silence from the artist and seemed to delineate a before (the Simone of the late 1950s to the early 1970s, the ‘long sixties’) and an after that would stretch from Baltimore through to her death at the age of seventy. There seemed to be no ‘middle period’ of her career (though I later changed my mind about that).

In coming to Simone later on as an example of loss, memory and nostalgia, I was thinking of the artist who recorded the achingly sad songs ‘My Father’ and ‘All I Want from You’ for Baltimore. I wanted to know how those songs of late melancholy fit with the narrative of the more famous Simone of the civil rights era. Might there be a connection between the sense of weariness that I associated with Baltimore and the outcome of the revolutionary times in which Simone’s career had burned brightest? My attempts to approach this and other questions relating to Nina Simone’s work became the work of a thesis chapter and, in 2013, a book devoted to the artist. During the course of my exploration of Simone’s life and work, I encountered many more evocative and intriguing recordings. Amongst these were Simone’s live recording of Sandy Denny’s ‘Who Knows Where the Time Goes’, which appeared on the 1970 album Black
Gold. Simone, who was thirty-six when the performance was recorded, was far from being old in any but a child’s use of the term, yet there was something in her delivery that spoke to me of age, experience and time. This is partly due to the dramatic way in which Simone introduces the song to her audience. During a lengthy reflection that makes implicit reference to her celebrity and explicit reference to that of others (notably actress Faye Dunaway), Simone offers the following observations:

Let's see what we can do with this lovely, lovely thing that goes past all racial conflict and all kinds of conflict. It is a reflective tune and some time in your life you will have occasion to say ‘What is this thing called time? You know, what is that?’ … [T]ime is a dictator, as we know it. Where does it go? What does it do? Most of all, is it alive? Is it a thing that we cannot touch and is it alive? And then one day you look in the mirror—how old!—and you say, ‘Where did the time go?’

Simone’s framing of the song, and her intimate, time-stopping performance, led me to consider this version as an example of what I had started to call, during my doctoral work, ‘the late voice’. While my initial thoughts about the concept were mainly connected to work produced by musicians (mostly singers) in the later parts of their careers and to what has been termed, in discussion of artists more broadly, ‘late style’, I soon became interested in the possibility of lateness recognised at earlier stages than might be customary. In other words, while there seemed to be a fit between chronologically late work (work created by artists late in their lives and/or careers) and themes of time, age and experience, there was nothing to exclude such a connection with artists at much earlier stages in their lives. This was made even more evident by considering ‘Who Knows Where the Time Goes’ as a song composed by Sandy Denny at the age of nineteen or twenty.
This realisation was both enabling (in suggesting trajectories beyond those explored in my previous work) and problematic. The problem lay in my refusal to let go of the idea that to talk about age and ageing necessitated more than merely talking about later stages of life, let alone ‘old age’. It might have been enough to stop at my earliest conception of late voice and to provide an account that examined the late work of a number of musicians and perhaps also their attitudes towards lateness and/or late style. Indeed, it was (and still is) tempting to do this. But critical inquiry often refuses to rest at the entry level, even for the clearing and establishing of new ground, and I was constantly drawn back to the notion of early lateness, to a more pervasive use of popular song to record experience gained and/or anticipated regardless of the age of the singer (and, as I came to realise, of the listener) This necessitated the incorporation of time into my study, because, as Denny’s song so eloquently shows, we reflect on time at many stages in our lives. As a consideration of time lost, time to come and time passing, ‘Who Knows Where the Time Goes’ can be heard to represent a moment of transition. To place the song in its author’s biography is to speculate on the thoughts of a young woman leaving behind the friends and familiaris of her youth as she embarks on the rest of her life. Other such songs may spring to mind: ‘Bob Dylan’s Dream’, Richard Thompson’s ‘Meet on the Ledge’, Neil Young’s ‘Sugar Mountain’, Joni Mitchell’s ‘The Circle Game’ and also her ‘Both Sides, Now’.

Popular music artists, as performers in the public eye, offer a privileged site for the witnessing and analysis of ageing and its mediation. This book embarks upon such an analysis by considering issues of time, memory, innocence and experience in modern (predominantly mid-late twentieth century) popular song and the use by singers and songwriters of a ‘late voice’. Lateness, as developed in the foregoing examples and as I present it in this book, refers to five primary
issues: chronology (the stage in an artist’s career); the vocal act (the ability to convincingly portray experience); afterlife (posthumous careers made possible by recorded sound); retrospection (how voices ‘look back’ or anticipate looking back); and the writing of age, experience, lateness and loss into song texts. Supplementing theorisations of the ways that lived experience mixes with that learned from books and images, consideration of music allows us to posit the concept of ‘sounded experience’, a term intended to describe how music reflects upon and helps to mediate life experience over extended periods of time (indeed, over lifetimes). Connected to this is a supposition that phonography, understood as the after-effects of the revolution in experience initiated by sound recording, provides a rich site for exploring issues of memory, time, lateness and afterlife.

Recent years have witnessed a growth in research on ageing and the experience of later stages of life, focussing on physical health, lifestyle and psychology. Work in the latter field has overlapped to a certain extent with the field of memory studies. Popular music studies has also begun to explore the fertile area of age, experience and memory, although the focus to date has tended to be on the reception side, on how people use culture at later stages in their lives. My work, while embracing these fields, seeks to connect age, experience and lateness with particular performers and performance traditions via the identification and analysis of ‘late voice’ in singers and songwriters of mid-late twentieth century popular music, with a primary focus on North American and British singers at this initial stage. The recent interest in later stages of life across the arts, humanities and sciences has arguably grown as scholars react to the consequences of an ageing population. This has been reflected within popular music studies in books such as Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner’s ‘Rock On’: Women. Ageing and Popular Music, Andy Bennett and Paul Hodkinson’s Ageing and Youth Cultures: Music, Style and Identity and
Bennett’s *Music, Style and Aging: Growing Old Disgracefully?* The first two titles, both collections of essays, intersect with my project while being distinct from it. *The Late Voice* is closer to ‘Rock On’ in that the latter book examines the cultural work done by popular music performers as they reflect on issues of age, experience and public persona; it also utilises an interdisciplinary approach, highlighting the intersection of performance studies, cultural and media studies, and textual analysis. Yet ‘Rock On’ differs from my project in its exclusive focus on female performers and its gender-based analyses. While issues of gender have been important to certain stages of my work, my primary focus here is on time, age and experience. My work also differs in that it explores the early attainment of ‘lateness’ by certain performers and also considers the ‘lateness’ of certain musical genres. Where Andy Bennett’s monograph and the essays collected in *Ageing and Youth Cultures* dwell exclusively on audiences, my study focuses on performers, musical texts and critical discourse. Work on ageing youth cultures and popular musical audiences has proven beneficial to my project but I have not undertaken ethnographic research. One of the currents that runs through my book is an emphasis on the continued importance of a textual analysis that takes performers and their texts (and the connection of the two via the late voice) as its primary material. With its suggestion of the early attainment of lateness, rather than an exclusive emphasis on older performers, *The Late Voice* shares some of the concerns of Sheila Whiteley’s *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender*. Whiteley shows how voices have been used in popular music to give an illusion of age greater than that possessed by performers, an observation that is useful for my exploration of anticipated lateness. This focus on the voice, along with Whiteley’s interest in intertextuality, provides valuable resonances with my own project. However, the overall scope of the two works is quite distinct and the focus on gender is not one which has guided the case studies or the observations in my book for the most part (though I do consider aspects of masculinity in chapter 3).
I have attempted in *The Late Voice* to contribute towards the maintenance of popular music studies as a field in which the kind of aesthetic concerns applied to classical and art music can be explored in a rigorous and sustained manner, allowing for serious consideration of popular music texts from both musicological and socio-cultural perspectives. Since Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz’s landmark article on age, the body and experience in the music of Hank Williams in 1990, there has been little serious popular music research that has successfully explored the biographical, historical, cultural and geopolitical contexts in which lateness (here understood primarily as experience) is represented in musical performance, in particular that of singers and songwriters.⁵ Such qualities are often recognised and highlighted in accounts of popular music in the press but there still remains a need for scholarly, culturally- and textually-informed study of this area.

Ethnographic methodologies have tended to be favoured in studies of popular music and age, perhaps due to a recognition that they provide a more democratic and accurate picture of musical meaning than that allowed by the traditional musicological or critical ‘expert’. This valuable insight has helped lead to the development of the disciplines of popular music studies and popular music education. Such practical considerations of musical production and consumption now arguably hold a prominent position in institutions involved in teaching and researching popular music. However, one drawback of these developments is a potential dismantling of the common ground forged between popular music studies and traditional musicology. Such a recognition of common ground enabled popular music to be valued as an aesthetically important medium, an insight that, in turn, was instrumental in allowing the space for today's popular music and music education courses. In writing this book the way I have, I wish to make a strong claim for the continued relevance
of aesthetic, cultural and critical theory in the study of popular music in order to (re)assert the latter’s importance in everyday life. Here, theory, far from being impractical or removed from ‘the real world’, is focussed on constantly expanding the horizons of what it is possible to think and know about music.

Keith Negus, whose recent work provides a welcome exploration of the role of time and narrative in the interpretation of popular song, makes it clear that it is possible to combine narrative theory with phenomenological methods and to imagine, if not empirically ‘prove’, the relationship between the experience of an individual listener and that of a larger community. He does so partly by examining what it means to interpret songs in the first place and partly by considering the mixing of private and public listening rituals enabled by recorded music. With regard to the latter, Negus cites Richard Kearney’s formulation that ‘subjects, individual or communal, come to imagine and know themselves in the stories they tell about themselves’ and that our self-understanding develops as part of an understanding of (and learned from) others; far from being isolated from the knowledge and perspective of others, we (and this is one of the reasons I can confidently say ‘we’) become who we are as we become aware of others. As Negus points out, by ‘emphasizing how human engagement with recorded songs can be understood as a private ritual’ one is not thereby ‘suggesting that this is “asocial”’; furthermore, ‘notions of interiority need not be deployed to imply romantic, unmediated, essentialist qualities of artistic expression, unfiltered by or unshaped by social relationships and structures’.

Classical musicology has a well-established history of associating particular stylistic characteristics to periods in the lives of composers, and theorisations of lateness and late style in the arts have invariably privileged classical music. This book asks whether there is a connection between the ‘seriousness’ of a
cultural form (the extent to which it is considered an ‘art’) and the acceptability of speaking about ‘late style’. Does popular music only invite such consideration when it is thought of as ‘art’? Furthermore, has one of the outcomes of popular music studies been to remove the ‘artiness’ of popular music and to reassert its social function? If so, where would that leave a seemingly artist-based theory such as the late voice? By considering artists alongside styles, and biography alongside history, I seek to examine how each sheds light on the other while revisiting the debts owed by popular music studies to cultural studies and critical theory.

One of the possibilities that can be hypothesised is that lateness in an artist’s work coincides with the recognition of lateness in a style or tradition. Building on theories expounded in my previous work, I wish to ascertain the ‘eventness’ of contemporary popular music and argue for an adaptation of work by theorists of lateness to popular music and culture. While I do not intend to engage in the long-running debate initiated by Adorno’s work on popular music, the seriousness which I attach to the ‘late style’ of popular musicians and my positing of the late voice as a concept for which popular singers and songwriters provide especially compelling case studies, is intended to serve as an argument for the aesthetic value of popular music, even as it departs from an assumption of that value rather than an attempt to justify it.

Although at some points during this project I considered testing Adorno’s, Said’s and Spitzer’s accounts of late style against my case studies, I have ultimately—at least for this book—decided against doing so. There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, I feel there is already a lot of ground to stake out in presenting my main concepts of time, age, experience and late voice and to embark on an additional comparative process would delay even further the analytical work I wish to undertake with my case studies. Secondly, my concept
of the late voice is, as already indicated, not solely (and often not even mainly) concerned with late style in the manner described by previous writers; the representation of time, age and experience alongside the ability to convincingly ‘voice’ such representation regardless of career-point, is of more interest to me. Thirdly, it remains to be seen whether an analytical language developed with a fairly rigidly defined notion of ‘music’ (classical, historical, instrumental) could, or should, be transferred to the types of music under consideration here. Of these three reasons, the last is the one I remain most ambivalent about, in that I am aware that it may contradict my earlier stated desire to treat popular music as seriously as any other art form. However, I believe that by allowing my conceptualisation of the late voice to emerge from consideration of my case studies, I am following a similar process to the ‘late style’ theorists by allowing the musical examples to determine the conceptual framework. At the same time, those examples hopefully provide sufficient evidence to continue arguing for the seriousness of popular song.

**Overview of the Book**

Each of my areas of interest comes with a vast literature attached to it and many concepts, theories and discoveries. The book is ambitious and impertinent enough to suggest the possibility of considering such big topics as time, age, experience and voice within a single volume that devotes most of its pages to accounts of particular singers and songwriters. But it is also, by necessity as much as inclination, modest in its realisation that it can only hope to pose certain questions, suggest some approaches, offer initial reflections and perhaps set a dialogue in motion. In Chapter 1, I provide initial thoughts about my areas of interest as they have emerged while thinking about the music that inspired the interest. I also consider my themes as encountered in other fields, including academic literature, poetry, film and fiction. The organisation of the sections
according my major themes—time, age, experience and voice—is an attempt to begin systematising the concepts in ways which are useful for the case studies which comprise the remaining chapters. Chapter 2 focuses, for the most part, on Ralph Stanley, the bluegrass or ‘old-time’ musician whose long career in popular music gained fresh recognition following the use of his music in the film O Brother, Where Art Thou? in 2000. Taking as a starting point the song ‘O Death’, the chapter examines discourse around Stanley’s age and the ways in which age is witnessed in his voice. I provide an overview of Stanley’s career, followed by a discussion of different versions of ‘O Death’. I also consider the relationship between the particular and the universal and between the individual and the community. Chapter 3 offers an examination of selected work by Frank Sinatra and Leonard Cohen, analysing the ways in which age and experience are connected in popular culture to particular notions of male mastery. The era under discussion saw numerous challenges to such notions and various crises of masculinity can be determined in the work of Sinatra and Cohen, albeit that the former represents a retrospective look at an earlier, supposedly stable world, while the latter presents an arguably more progressive account of male doubt and insecurity. Both artists generated a significant amount of cultural discourse around their age, experience and relevancy at various stages of their careers and this discourse is also analysed. In Sinatra’s case I am also interested in the way he functions as an authorial figure in relation to the songs he interprets. Cohen is more obviously an author in his double role as poet and singer-songwriter; the former career also delays his appearance on the music stage, earning him a reputation as a rock era performer who was always already ‘old’. Chapter 4 turns to the work of Bob Dylan, an artist who claims a greater interest in ‘becoming’ than ‘being’ yet whose work also resonates with references to belonging, homeliness, stasis and the past. Dylan’s work is exemplary as an analysis of lateness in twentieth century popular and vernacular music and has followed a fascinating dialectic of belonging and distance with respect to its
socio-historical milieu. I examine Dylan’s poetics of place and displacement, suggesting that his constant reiteration of themes of movement, escape and quest are tempered by a tendency to also dwell on issues of belonging, home and return. Studying these aspects of his work also contributes to an argument for establishing a coherent, singular ‘self’ to this most enigmatic and shape-shifting of performers. Chapter 5 explores the notion of the ‘confessional’ singer-songwriter via a discussion of Joni Mitchell and Neil Young, both of whom have made extensive use of innocence and experience as elements within their songwriting. Mitchell and Young make fascinating use of childlike perspectives in their work, often contrasting the depiction of youth and newness with reflections on the ageing process and on the wisdom supposedly gained through experience. Both artists’ late careers are also examined to analyse the ways in which, as public figures, they have reinvented themselves and been able to reflect back on their earlier work.

Notes
7 This ‘we’ does not necessarily mean you and I, but the fact that you might not be included in this ‘we’, that you might hold diametrically opposed views to me, does not mean that there is no shared experience; the latter comes from those whose knowledge, perspectives and explorations have helped me to shape my own. They authorise me to say ‘we’.
Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain (London: Bloomsbury, 2005); Michael Spitzer, Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven’s Late Style (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).