

Using the band Queen as a case study, Anne Desler discusses the idea of a popular music canon (detailing the strata of mainstream, critical and academic canons) and its basis on three main criteria of transcendence, historical importance and ‘authenticity.’

Don’t Forget About Queen!

Anne Desler first discusses the idea of a popular music canon and how some are critical and resentful of canon formation, and demand “‘self-reflection and historical awareness’ of popular music scholars so they don’t end of up the rearguard of the old aesthetic canon.”¹ Additionally, how music is labeled or categorized can be a problem. When addressing the ‘greatest albums’, different sources (e.g., von Appen and Doebling, and Wyn Jones) use terms ‘pop canon’, ‘popular music canon’ and ‘pop-rock canon’ interchangeably. It is notable that ‘greatest album’ lists often come from mostly higher educated white males, whereas scholars include a much higher percentage of African American artists. Desler states the discrepancies between “popular” rock music reception and “academic” rock music reception indicate that a universally valid popular music canon does not exist. Desler then identifies three main criteria for a traditional aesthetic canon: transcendence (i.e., standing the test of time), historical importance (including influencing current and later artists), and ‘authenticity’ (previously labeled as ‘greatness’). Canonic status is described to be indications of 1) perpetual presence, 2) continuous generation of secondary materials, and 3) the use of canonic language (e.g., ‘masterpiece,’ ‘genius’); the first two can be objective, while the third is a matter of judgment and makes it problematic within an academic context. Desler then discusses the mainstream, critical and academic canons.

¹ Anne Desler, “History without royalty? Queen and the strata of the popular music canon,” *Popular Music* 32/3 (October, 2013): 385.

Desler associates the mainstream canon with mass audience listeners, such as “dedicated fans, musical ‘omnivores’ and casual listeners.”² These listeners contribute to canonization in varying ways, including consumer decisions, producing secondary materials themselves, and organizing fan activities. Technological developments and social networks have expanded their economic and cultural impact, distinguishing these listeners as canonisers as compared to the other strata of the canon. Desler equates mainstream audience activities with mainstream canonicity and lists 5 chief indicators as: market value, continuous visibility, consistent level of fan activities, the permeation of artists’ music into the collective memory, and artists’ taking on non-musical functions in society. There are examples of the significance of popular music for national culture, as evidenced by the playing of ‘God Save the Queen’ at the Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2002, as well as Queen’s music being used for the 2012 Olympic Games. Mainstream listeners and their preferred music supports the attribution of Queen’s appeal to audiences of various social, geographic and educational backgrounds and age groups.

Within the critical canon, a critic is described as a person with a high degree of expertise, judges professionally, are opinion leaders, and dissent from mainstream opinion. For popular music criticism, transcendence and historical importance are problematic when dealing with newly created music as they both require the passage of time; as a result, the concept of ‘authenticity’ has become a key criterion regarding newly created music. Regarding Queen’s authenticity, there was initial rejection followed by eventual inclusion. There were 3 stages of Queen’s critical reception: their debut to mixed reviews, negative opinion, followed by a reassessment. It is noted that “Critics’ positions are also influenced by the market position of the medium they work for.”³ Opinion changed due mixed reviews in *Rolling Stone*, where one critic

² Ibid., 388.

³ Ibid., 392.

described Freddie Mercury's voice as a "passable pop voice" and uses the term "pedestrian" when describing Brian May's guitar work. Critic D. Marsh reviewed Queen in the light of punk values (e.g., distrust of 'the establishment', association with the working class), suggesting Queen had "pulled the music furthest from its roots" such as the blues which originated in low-class contexts, and associated the band with 'selling out', and addressed their commercial aspirations. Political and social issues of the time played a role in how Queen was viewed. With the backdrop of the Cold War, Marsh associated the band with totalitarianism and mass manipulation. Homophobia was also an issue regarding the band's image; with the onset of AIDS, the band was associated with homosexuality with Mercury growing a mustache associated with the New York gay scene, and the censure in the US of a music video in which Queen wears drag costumes. Queen's loss of authenticity was complete in critics' eyes. Per Desler, critics "perceived such effects as transgression on the ideals of rock as serious and emotionally honest expression and opposition to the mainstream."⁴

Queen's eventual acceptance was due in part to the re-writing of popular music history in NME's *The New Musical Express Rock 'n' Roll Years* (Heslam 1992), where entries about Queen are "carefully selected to portray the band in an unequivocally positive manner."⁵ The NME referred to Queen using canonic expressions such as 'rock giants', and showed support for Brian May's animal rights activities. Critical reassessment continued with Mercury's death (a billion viewers worldwide) and tribute concert (including a line-up of popular music acts and show business stars). It is noted Queen achieved transcendence and historical importance despite critical opposition. Queen was endowed with social significance and effected changes in the public perception of AIDS and homosexuality, which brought about the re-evaluation of Queen

⁴ Ibid., 395.

⁵ Ibid., 395.

regarding ‘authenticity’. Changes took place within music criticism. These changes include the disappearance of negative bias against education in the media, widespread Internet access affecting issues of customer loyalty, market research and related market shares, and mainstream and music media polls.

Regarding the academic canon, Desler cites Bohlman and how scholars “negotiate relationships of authority and power,”⁶ as they are engaged in making choices. Desler notes research of canonic artists 1) bestows authority and prestige of artists’ canonicity upon the research, and 2) ensures widespread interest. However she notes quality and relevance depend on factors that change with the historical context. Desler cites three main factors shaping canon formation within popular music studies: the field’s historical development, dominant debates and relationship to other disciplines, and music journalism. She further states how sociological and political approaches offered an avenue for “the validation of popular music studies as an academic field.”⁷ Regarding socio-political relevance, Desler cites three factors of ‘authenticity’: 1) the beginnings of popular music studies predating the critique of the ‘high’ arts canons, 2) ‘authenticity’ as a term indigenous to popular music and serving as a value marker, and 3) ‘greatness’ and rock ‘authenticity’ being premised on the same Romantic ideology, with popular music being measured mainly by rock values. Desler states how “the importance of ‘authenticity’ as a value criterion was cemented by its significance as a tool in scholars’ continuous reactions to the Frankfurt School.”⁸ Desler continues by stating that ‘authenticity’ also affects popular music scholars personally, and that the relationship between scholars and their subject matter tends to be closer than in the ‘classical’ disciplines. Desler cites a three part

⁶ Ibid., 397.

⁷ Ibid., 397.

⁸ Ibid., 398.

process in becoming a popular music scholar: they begin as mainstream listeners, later acquire the critical skill of evaluating music, then acquire the tools of academic neutrality and openness. She further compares popular music scholars to Beethoven scholars, and how the former have lived through the era of the Cold War whereas the latter's knowledge is mediated by time and history books. Desler states how the roles of mainstream listener and that of critic are embedded within the popular music scholar. She further cites how popular music scholars and their personal connection with popular music, ongoing academic debate about its artistic value, and the field's connection with music journalism, as compared to the traditional disciplines, leave more scope for expression of personal opinions. Desler cites how Queen is absent from textbooks on popular music styles and analysis as these books take a reductionist approach, as the band's songs often transgressed stylistic boundaries and how "their output as a whole defies stylistic categorization."⁹

In Desler's conclusion, she states that canon formation itself cannot be prevented; popular music canons exist, yet they are less fixed in position than those in the 'classical' arts. She further states how various scholars suggest that "not only may punk's historical importance be overrated, but that its agenda has been misrepresented and it has attracted a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention."¹⁰ She makes the point that "popular music studies have proved both their own and popular music's importance; there is no longer a need to validate either in relationship to the classical arts and disciplines and their value criteria."¹¹ She finishes by stating that music history includes both the chronicling of the opposition to the mainstream and that of the mainstream itself.

⁹ Ibid., 400.

¹⁰ Ibid., 401.

¹¹ Ibid., 402.

Queen's contribution to popular music is clear. It will be interesting to see how popular music studies evolves over time and how today's scholars will shape the future versions of the popular music canon. It continues to astound me as to the many facets that go into the making a canon and those that might be included, from the scholar, to consumer related issues, down to a single mainstream listener. I'm sure the average mainstream listener is generally unaware of the existence of the strata of a popular music canon, their characteristics and interdependencies, of a mainstream canon, critical canon and academic canon. Yet their role can affect all three! As a "canon formation graph" may not exist, I will be making my own and consulting various contributors and texts along the way, in my best attempt at illustrating the many contributors, large and small, local and global, to the formation of a canon, whether it's a popular music canon other other type. And if we're talking about a popular music canon, I would want to remind myself: "Don't forget about Queen!"

Bibliography

Anne Desler, "History without royalty? Queen and the strata of the popular music canon," *Popular Music* 32/3 (October, 2013): 385-405.

3 Compelling Questions:

1. How much of the factors associated with mainstream listeners do you think are considered in the *music writing process*? (e.g., commercial success vs. art for art's sake?)
2. Where do you see the value of the music critic with respect to the level of importance in canon formation, as compared to the value of the mainstream listener or the scholar? Is it possible that the music critic, with all the possible biases and personal connection to the music may be elevated too much? too little?
3. If you had to choose, in which of the three “canonic roles” could you see yourself having the most rewarding and satisfying living: the mainstream listener, the critic, or the scholar? And why!?