

Popular Imperialism: The British Pop Music Industry 1950-1975

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Abstract

In this paper the general contours of the British popular music industry are outlined, charting the development of new technologies, new business forms and new market structures, which transformed the sector between 1950 and 1975. The paper then goes on to introduce some concepts and ideas related to the global impact of the business, including its relationship to the USA and wider markets, and specifically the role of London as a centre for production, but also as a key cultural idea in the pop world of the 1960s.

Introduction

The British popular music industry developed and transformed itself during the first decades following World War Two, becoming, alongside the USA, a major force in the global entertainment industry. This paper will outline the nature of this growth, examining its components and impact. The development of the pop music industry is a complex phenomenon. There has been much interest in recent years in the relationship between business and wider cultural and social dynamics. Scholars such as Ken Lipartito, Mick Rowlinson and Geoff Jones have been part of a 'cultural turn' in business history, examining the role of cultures, somehow defined, in influencing and shaping business strategy, trajectories and so on. With the pop music industry, however, we need to engage with a sector which trades in culture itself. An industry involved directly in the production of culture, and calling for analysis of an increasingly challenging nature.

The pop music industry did not emerge *de novo* in the post war period. It grew from a series of enterprises and markets already established over many years. The industry in 1945 comprised a complex hierarchy of businesses stretching from publishers, record and record player manufacturers, venue owners, media businesses; a myriad of intermediaries, agencies, impresarios and management companies and so on. Yet following 1945, the structural nature of the sector was to change in radical fashion. New business forms developed, comprising both restructured large firms – what might be termed *Chandlerian* firms after Alfred Chandler's model based on the impact of the large, multi-divisional, managerially controlled enterprises which rose to prominence in the USA in the 20th century - and new start-ups. New production and distribution technologies featured in this change, including the vinyl micro-groove disk, multi-track studio recording, various developments in electrification and amplification of instruments and so on. Some of these developments, like the 45 rpm single and electric guitar stand as iconic technologies, cultural artifacts in their own right. New markets emerged

and grew during the period. In addition to the steadily accreting traditional markets for music, new consumers were seemingly brought into existence, notably the 'affluent' teenager – a volatile and unpredictable sector of the market perhaps, in an industry increasingly characterized by volatility, fashion and change.

Big business and pop.

If we turn first to the growth of the major record companies during this period we are immediately confronted by a series of intriguing questions new to business history. First among these might be - how does a large and complex enterprise survive and grow in a sector characterized by rapid change and product innovation, a world of fashions and recalcitrant artists, where even the terms 'corporate' and 'commercial' take on a pejorative meaning? In Britain in the 1950s the market place was increasingly dominated by the big four record companies – EMI, Decca, Phillips and Pye. Of these the first two, EMI and Decca had the largest share. Both these companies conformed to the classic Chandler model of big business to a certain extent. They were both multi-divisional and multi-national enterprises, with music production comprising only one aspect of their activities. EMI, for example, produced recorded music, but also manufactured record players (often elaborate articles of household furniture), and a range of unrelated electronic equipment stretching from TV and toasters to the nascent computer technologies of the 1950s, and later CAT scanners. EMI, like Decca, operated in a number of defence markets, the latter producing radar technologies for example.

These large companies, as noted, exerted an increasing degree of control over the pop industry as the 1950s wore on. They had the economic power and technical capabilities needed to construct both recording facilities and distribution systems. Indeed, scholars in the US, and more recently in the UK have attempted to correlate the growth in size and power of these corporations with the trends in innovation in the marketplace of pop. Put simply, when big companies control output, diversity and innovation in styles of music are seen to decline. Peterson and Berger, put this thesis forward for the US pop market, Gourvish and Tennent have attempted the same, though somewhat more critically for the UK. Perhaps it might be instructive to take an artist's eye view of the large pop corporation as it existed in the late 1950s. Discovered by an agent or impresario, the artist might be lucky enough to gain an introduction, then audition with one of the producers at the record company. Successfully passing this stage a studio recording session would be arranged. Led at the appointed hour to a sterile and intimidating studio, surrounded by white-coated technicians and grey-suited corporate employees, the artist would be informed which song or songs they were to record, the arrangement being already decided upon by an in-house arranger. Professional session musicians would provide the backing (musicians in groups would more likely than not sit in the corner watching at this stage). The artist would be expected to perform within the time allotted, then to subsequently engage in whatever promotional activity was deemed necessary to ensure success, ranging from the construction of a sartorial and personal public image to an often grueling treadmill of live performances. It

is difficult not to see the artist during this period as a commodity – finely ground by the corporate pop mill.

In Britain, a wave of creativity which had perhaps been generated in the mid-1950s, stimulated by developments in the USA, but occasionally given a domestic force of its own, as in the case of the skiffle craze, was increasingly controlled and mediated by agents and producers tied to an older world of music - melodic, dance music in the main. In the networks and clusters of agents and managers centred around Soho in London, this meant the selection, restyling and grooming of artists by impresarios such as Larry Parnes, and his notorious 'stable' of acts with evocative appellations – Vince Eager, Billy Fury, Adam Faith, Marty Wilde and so on. Within the portals of big corporations like EMI control was wielded by producers such as Norrie Paramor, who used his dance band heritage to defuse and blunt any emergent edginess in the nascent rock culture. While Elvis Presley, Bo Diddley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry were assaulting delicate sensibilities in the USA, Britain was served up an increasingly clean-cut, variety-based pop diet, with ersatz rockers such as Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard, both destined to be the housewives choice.

Big businesses like EMI and Decca, comprised cultural fiefdoms, where creativity was mediated to a certain extent by an entrenched and impervious hierarchy. These firms capitalized on productive resources and distributional systems which gave them oligopolistic power in the marketplace. Increasingly, however, this power was more and more difficult to sustain against a steady pressure for change. New waves of creativity – new music – emerged as the 1950s wore on and the 1960s began. Again the USA proved to be the fount of this change. As Rock 'n' Roll in the USA was itself becoming more sanitized, do wop, soul music, surf music began to gain in domestic, and international markets. However the exception was R & B, which, whilst moderately successful in the States, was seized upon by British artists, promoted through a new range of clubs, to produce the wave of artists and groups, including the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Kinks and the Who, which would soon develop a uniquely British variant of this music and deliver it back to the States with such effect. With this new music came a new degree of confidence and power residing with the artist, with youth, and with the managers and agents who worked with them. This power was to challenge the hegemony of the major British record companies.

These majors had already seen limits on their power to a certain extent. The promotion of records in the UK for example, had to be partly achieved through the broadcast media. In Britain this meant commercial TV and radio following the mid-1950s, but also, more importantly through programmes on the BBC, the publicly owned national broadcaster, still the most important vehicle for promotion of any pop act. The BBC retained a cultural affinity for 'good' or 'appropriate' music in line with its basic remit to educate the public and act as the guardian of popular taste. This could and did cause problems, when the Corporation encountered the promotional activities of the major record companies. As record charts became increasingly popular, for example, the BBC found itself in an uncomfortable position, promoting a commercial device designed to indicate which records the public should buy. Beyond these systemic

difficulties experienced by the majors in promoting their product, there were growing difficulties in controlling or predicting new developments in the marketplace of pop. Since Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer analysts have attempted to demonstrate that in the modern age of industrial societies art – in our case, pop music – is increasingly fed to a docile, passive and receptive mass market by systems and organizations which form part of the dominant power structure. Even a cursory dip into social history belies this simplistic notion. In the 1950s and 1960s, new fashions and trends in music emerged in a complicated and kaleidoscopic fashion, not from the ‘street’ per se, but in mediated and multi-locational ways. Local and regional followings emerged for pop, through local clubs, networks of friends, and larger networks of stylistic genres. Examples here might include the club scenes in London, or Merseyside, or the group affiliations of mod movement – spreading a national affinity for certain new kinds of music, which radiated out from London from the early 1960s onwards.

The major record companies employed a range of strategies to deal with or confront this developing marketplace as it began to slip from the grasp of their ‘visible hand’. Firstly they employed a multi-level product strategy. It is tempting to tell the history of pop with reference to a series of new artists, new styles and hits. In reality the market as it developed in the 1950s and 1960s was really characterised by an increasingly layered effect. New artists and styles came along, and many were ephemeral, but some styles endured, and formed traditional sectors, able to command a perennial following from perhaps a range of age groups, or teenagers who adhered to a certain style as they matured. As Leslie Hill outlined in his 1970 article, looking back at his years as director of EMI, the company did not in fact rely on a series of hit records from newly found talent. This was far too precarious a strategy for a company like EMI, and very difficult to implement anyway. (Large companies, it should be noted, always tend to struggle with innovation and trends in a volatile marketplace. Witness the effect of information technology on established manufacturers from the 1970s onwards, for example.) Instead they employed a multi-level marketing plan based on a combination of sales including new acts, but also established favourites, re-packaged and re-configured existing records, and newly targeted sectors of the marketplace, such as budget records. They also integrated downwards into the retail chain, as in the case of EMI and its HMV record shops.

In addition to these layered marketing strategies, firms like EMI did try and anticipate trends, or at least set up mechanisms whereby they could stay in touch with fashions in music. We can observe this at a number of levels. Recognition that the pop world was developing into something which was beyond the expertise or experience, or even sympathy perhaps, of the corporate executive, was exhibited early on by Joseph Lockwood for example. When he took control of EMI in the mid-1950s he began a series of reforms aimed at enhancing the companies position in the pop market. Though an aficionado of classical music, Lockwood saw that the pop market was rapidly becoming more important, and acted accordingly. Through acquisition strategy he linked the company to the success of Capitol Records in the USA, for example. He also empowered the pop divisions within EMI, and importantly appointed new

producers - younger producers with more innovative potential. The prime example here is George Martin, who was given a great deal of autonomy to run his Parlophone label within EMI, and went on to sign EMI's most spectacular success, the Beatles. (It is somewhat ironic that Martin, who was in many ways the *enfant terrible* of EMI, has been portrayed in most accounts of the Beatles story as a corporate fuddy duddy in a suit and (notorious) tie.) A similar story could be told of the Philips owned Polygram strategy in providing their Polygram label with autonomy in the emerging pop-rock markets in the late 1960s.

This idea of a label as somehow a friendly or kindred place for *avant garde* musical spirits was of course replicated in a series of start up companies which began to emerge in the 1960s. This began a tradition which was to stretch from labels such as Immediate and Island through to Rough Trade and Factory Records. Thus, in addition to the strategies employed by major record companies to control, contain, detect or exploit fashion changes in the marketplace, the 1960s saw the emergence of a cadre of new companies, often start ups, which gained market share, sometimes in niches and genres, occasionally across the board. This development reflected a number of trends – the development of technology which reduced the costs of studio recording, the growth in confidence and experience of some managers, agents, and frequently the musicians themselves. Companies such as Rak Records, run by Mickie Most, Track Records, founded by the Who managers Chris Stamp and Kit Lambert, Robert Stigwood's Reaction records, Chris Blackwell's Island label, Immediate Records founded by Andrew Loog Oldham, the irrepressible manager of the Rolling Stones, and RGM Music – Joe Meek's production company. The archetype of the assertive artists in this transition or transference of power are of course the Beatles, who gained an enormous level of autonomy within EMI by virtue of their massive market potential, and who subsequently, and disastrously as it turned out, tried to control their own corporate fate through the establishment of Apple Records. One key feature in all this new enterprise is the connection which remained with the major companies. More often than not the new companies controlled only one aspect of the business – artist management, studio recording and so on. When it came to manufacture, promotion and distribution, and particularly the latter, they frequently relied upon deals with the majors. They were in fact mostly symbiotic companies, and many eventually were formally absorbed into the corporate structure of the majors.

The roots of British pop imperialism

So, given the above survey of some of the structural changes within the British pop music industry, how might we understand the global impact of British Pop music during this period? Firstly the role of the major record companies is clearly a factor. Firms such as EMI and Decca conform to the classic Chandler model, not only in important aspects of their internal structure, but also in terms of their international reach. In this respect trans-Atlantic links were a central feature. This was important to British firms in that the biggest market in the world was in the USA, but also in that trans-Atlantic cultural links were crucial as musical styles, influences and performers criss-crossed the ocean (It should be noted though, that with the exception of the comparatively short-lived 'British

invasion' of the USA in the 1960s the prevailing winds of the pop trade blew in a Westerly direction, towards the shores of Europe.) British firms looked to the USA for innovative developments (or sometimes resisted, or slowly accepted it must be noted, as in the case of the 45 rpm record for example, British record companies sticking to the shellac-based 78 rpm for many years.). They also looked to the USA for an elaborate and constantly re-configuring series of formal and informal agreements, licensing deals and acquisitions. British firms also had a traditional global reach, often but not exclusively into Empire markets. An illustration of this might be Helen Shapiro, for example, who had number one hits for EMI in the early 1960s, which were released round the world simultaneously by EMI. Shapiro found herself an almost overnight success around the globe and was whisked away on world tours almost as soon as she hit the charts.

British record companies also stood to gain from a language perspective. Tied to the USA in a kind of binary Anglo-Saxon hegemony of Western post-war culture, British pop could ride the tide of Cold War cultural imperialism, following the US into global markets opened up in the wake of geo-political manoeuvring. As English increased its hold on international cultures and markets, British and American pop became a kind of global musical lingua franca. This is not to say that across Europe and Far East all pop was British, or indeed that all British pop was sung in English. Many artists re-recorded their hits in foreign languages (Not too much of a problem since they were not expected to learn the language, simply read the words, and the accuracy of their dialect was of little importance to pop fans, lyrics coming a poor second to melody, instrumentation, voice etc. in importance (perhaps)) In addition many songs were recorded by domestic artists. During the 1950s and into the 1960s the song usually had precedence over the artist, so many 'cover' versions of the same song might be in circulation simultaneously in the British and US markets. Domestic covers of these songs in wider global markets would not seem unusual in the least. In addition, domestic music, and domestic pop stars were an important sector of the markets. Occasionally artists would reverse the trend of Anglo-US hegemony and achieve success in Britain or the States – Franciose Hardy, Johnny Hallyday, Charles Aznavour, and Horst Jankowski for example. Generally speaking though US and British acts dominated their own markets, and they also made great inroads into markets around the world. That the lyrics were often in English seemed no real barrier in a world where English was of increasing centrality.

Another feature in the global reach of British pop music during this period may stem from the position of London as an emerging international cultural capital. Of course pop music was a major contributor to the development of 'swinging' London in the 1960s. But there were other components to this process – film, art and fashion for example combined with a new spirit of youthful exuberance centred on the city. In some senses London merely carried on its role as an international magnet, a role which had seen successive waves of migration and settlement, a magnet for the refugee and the ambitious alike. From Huguenot weavers to Hamburg bankers London had acted as the New York of Europe and exerted a pull on an entrepreneurial and cultural avante garde for many years. In terms of fashion and the arts in London in the 1960s there was perhaps a

quantum shift in this relentless traditional role. Areas of London were to take their place alongside Greenwich Village and Haight-Ashbury as centres of radical fashions and ideas as the 1960s progressed, but there was much more than this to the impact of the city as a whole, particularly when the diverse range of pop music was added to the equation. Other cities, such as Liverpool, or its German twin, Hamburg (both port cities) generated notable music based youth cultures in the early 1960s, but the speed at which London absorbed and appropriated Liverpool's blossoming pop status stands as testimony to the gravitational pull of the capital by the mid 1960s. Success, for virtually every act from the Beatles downwards, meant a move to the capital.

London had developed into a state of mind, and a business environment where youthful fashion entrepreneurs like Barbara Hulanicki and Mary Quant, co-existed with their musical equivalents – Andrew Loog Oldham, Chris Blackwell, Chris Stamp etc. A place where youth, enthusiasm and (chemically engineered) energy and naivety and inexperience could be positive assets when harnessed to business in the ferment of Carneby Street and the Kings Road. It could be argued that London was a nodal point for fashion, music and youth culture generally during the 1960s and as such the 'idea' of London carried with it an intangible but real promotional gravitas which propelled British pop music into the global marketplace. When many young people across Europe and Asia, and perhaps even the USA, bought British records in the 1960s they were not simply buying a catchy or evocative tune, they were also buying an image, they were buying a dream, all centred on London. A real image, painted and photographed by the avant garde artists like Peter Blake and Francis Bacon, and photographers like David Bailey, also more importantly an image in the mind. British enterprise, particularly the new, youthful enterprise sector, based in the capital, was partly responsible for generating and sustaining this dream. All of which occurred while the rest of British industry was losing its way in world markets. That other great icon of fashion, identity and style, the motorcar – particularly the sports car – was stemming the tide with (as it turned out, mechanically disastrous) models such as the Mini and E-Type, but industry in general was losing its grip on world markets, just as Great Britain was losing its role as a world power, despite random thrusts into high technology nuclear, computing and supersonic technologies. As the "American Challenge" became increasingly felt, perhaps the British pop industry stands out as the single example, to move against the tide. All the more remarkable perhaps given the continuing hegemony of that other entertainment sector, the US film and TV business based in Hollywood. In his talk, Dr Coopey will address further some of these elements in the success and impact of the British music industry during the period in question.