

Creativity, Communication and Musical Experience

Keith Negus and Michael Pickering

2008, Re-drafted version of article that appeared in David Hesmondhalgh & Keith Negus (eds) *Popular Music Studies* (Arnold, 2002), rights reverted to authors 2007.

When writing the first version of this article we began by declaring that creativity had become one of the most important yet least explored issues in the study of popular music. Its cultural significance was routinely noted but unexamined; its conceptual status was taken for granted but unquestioned. Our claim soon became buried under a deluge of scholarly and journalistic writings, policy documents, international conferences, academic and vocational courses, study centres and institutes, all announcing a serious interest in the issues surrounding creativity. We had been mulling over these issues ourselves since the mid-1990s, and gradually developed the ideas that led, several years later, to this article. Did we, during this time, become seriously mistaken, causing us to make a claim that was so much askew?

There was certainly something new in the sudden interest that was being taken in creativity. This was its almost exclusive focus on what were now being called the 'creative industries'. 'Creativity' had certainly become a more prevalent and ominous buzzword than we had imagined when we began our own discussions. It now seemed that the term was there to be freely appropriated and co-opted. Its largely positive resonances were enlisted and twisted by an opportunistic government who seized on the economic gains promised by 'culture' and the commercial benefits of national reinvention, with plain old Britain transmogrified into 'Creative Britain'; advertising for big business implied a market governed by creating rather than manufacturing processes; while bandwagon-hopping scholars were set on 'rebranding' a set of debates that have endured from early in the twentieth century. We looked on as unsolicited email after email appeared in our inboxes proclaiming yet another workshop or conference, policy or publication. All this seemed to involve huge commotion but little change.

With very few exceptions (see McGuigan, 1998, Garnham, 2005, and Schlesinger, 2007), the quantity of material did not challenge our argument. Instead, it confirmed for us that our argument had become even more pertinent. If anything, it needed to be asserted more emphatically. 'Creativity' and 'creative' are words that are *still* used uncritically. They are misused and abused, being deployed lazily and with the apparently self-evident assumption that we know what creativity is, or at least we do when we meet it. This is most drastically apparent in the taken-for-granted values that allow researchers to confidently delineate this business, but emphatically not that business, as belonging to the amorphous but glorious ensemble of the 'creative industries'. It is the unreflexive and casual use of the term 'creative', and the inherited but unexamined assumptions associated with the concept of creativity, which form the starting point for this article, and indeed for the book that developed out of it, involving a full-scale engagement with the broader cultural and sociological questions raised by the term (Negus & Pickering, 2004).

When turning specifically to popular music studies, rather than having reference to a varied set of issues arising from the general terrain of cultural hermeneutics, we find that creativity is often assumed to be in clear-cut tension with the powers that are restricting or obstructing its realisation and potential. The academic literature on music and musicians is permeated with familiar tales of how the creative impulse is corrupted or compromised by the obtuseness of executive managers, the interference of moral guardians, the financial imperatives driving the global entertainment industry, and in some countries the authoritarian forces of government and state. Creativity is then invoked as a redemptive

force in a critical argument about something else. Just what creativity in popular music might involve in its own right, as it were, and just what meanings it is being made to carry in any particular case, are questions seldom subject to any critical attention. This neglect may be due, at least in part, to the difficulties associated with the term, for as soon as we start to look at all closely at the idea of creativity, we quickly become aware of a plethora of contradictory images and associations, assertions and judgements. If these are part of the problem, they cannot be negotiated simply by turning away and passing on to less demanding concerns. Intractable topics have to be tackled.

In this article we want to begin unravelling the tangled web of meanings and associations which have become woven around the term creativity. Among other things, these link together conceptions of the elevated and mundane, the exceptional and ordinary. In taking a very particular route, drawing critically on a neglected strand in the work of Raymond Williams, we shall argue that valuable areas for further theorising and research can be opened up and developed by conceiving of it in terms of the communication of experience. How this is achieved and how the quality of the communication is evaluated provides us with a useful way of thinking about creativity, not least because these processes are integral to the politics of culture. Such an approach also enables us to retain a sense of the phenomenological experience of creativity as an act connecting producer with listener. We use the idea of the communication of experience to argue for a relational approach as a counter to sociologically reductive forms of analysis which tell us everything about the politics of culture but nothing about the practice of creativity and how it is valued.

Innovation and Novelty

In his brief analysis of the semantics of the term 'creative', Raymond Williams (1976) revealed how the contemporary western concept of creativity can be traced back through a Judaeo-Christian tradition of thought to ideas about the divine creation of the physical and human world. The strength of this tradition made the emergence of its secularised meanings a slow and protracted process. The term changed only gradually from its earlier, exclusively cosmological reference, as in divine creation, bringing the world itself and the creatures within it into being, with the ancillary term 'creature' deriving from the same etymological stem. Expansion of the sense of the term began in the sixteenth century, particularly in relation to processes of making by people. Its modern meanings emerge from this new humanist emphasis, the earliest tendency to which can be traced in Renaissance theory. Nevertheless, the prior cosmological reference remained powerful enough for human artistic creation to be at times unfavourably compared with nature as the external manifestation of divine creation, or for the word to be used pejoratively to indicate falseness and contrivance, where what was created was equivalent to fabrication rather than valued expressive quality.

From the later seventeenth century onwards, the modern sense of the word gained in significance through its consciously validating association with art. By the time of the Romantics, the term's positive value was assured. Threads of its earliest meanings were retained, with artistic activity carrying with it associations of something magical or metaphysical, and with creativity being exclusively manifest in the poet as, in some guises, a sort of messenger from God or, in others, an intensely perceptive spirit able to elevate our seeing to a superior reality. It is especially through ideas of poetic inspiration that these older meanings of the word 'creative' have proved resilient, even as the terms 'creation' and 'creativity' have themselves been more radically changed. The earliest example (1728) cited by Williams of an explicit connection of imaginative human creation with a noumenal

source, in the mythological personification of an artistically inspiring goddess, has a specifically modern emphasis: ‘companion of the Muse, Creative Power, Imagination’.

The idea of a Muse has for a long time seemed decidedly dated, with all the resonance of a mannered Romantic conceit, yet the conception of divine inspiration in the act of writing poetry remained a remarkably strong, even if less than central element in modernism. The characteristic effect has been to play down the act of making itself, as a deliberately learned and practised craft. This can, for example, be detected in Yeats’s description of the act of poetic creation – ‘I made it out of a mouthful of air’ – as if his own shaping mind had been absent from the activity of composition. It would be wrong to suppose that this way of accounting for the act of poetic creation is merely an enchanting legacy of the Celtic Twilight. Throughout the twentieth century, when the term ‘creativity’ became established as denoting the faculty to which the verb ‘create’ relates as a process, these earlier associations continued to be invoked as an active, and more than residual sense of the term. So, for example, John Lennon distinguished between the songs that he composed simply because a new album had to be produced, and the ‘real music ... the music of the spheres, the music that surpasses understanding ... I’m just a channel ... I transcribe it like a medium’ (quoted in Waters, 1988). John Taverner uses the same metaphor, and refers to ‘auditory visions’ when he feels that music is being dictated to him (Barber, 1999).

This continuing conjunction of the mystical and metaphysical with the material and mundane, the elevated with the profane, seems to confound any attempt to develop a sociologically informed understanding of musical creativity. In the face of this difficulty, we want to argue that we should attempt to retain a sense of both the exceptional and pervasive meanings of the term. Three sets of issues accompany this attempt. Each of them follow, in different ways, from the inherited meanings and associations of the term which derive from its historical development.

First, any effort to articulate the experience of the creative process pushes us to the edge of what words can say. It inevitably involves having to bridge the gap between the sensational experience of creating – whether a song, a symphony or an improvised saxophone solo – and the necessity of translating an understanding of that experience into language that can be communicated to others. The endurance of this gap is perhaps unavoidable, since those acts of creativity in which someone is immersed and at one with the act itself are quite distinct from subsequent, relatively self-conscious efforts to describe what the creative process involves. This is why we often look to metaphorical forms of expression in referring to the phenomenological experience of creating and it is why certain creative experiences are rendered in a pseudo-religious or non-rational manner. Yet because creativity is always achieved within quite specific social, historical and political circumstances, we should at least be cautious about making or accepting any grand generalisations about the creative process.

A second issue concerns the opposition between that which is felt to be merely produced and that which is experienced as truly inspired. This opposition informs the valuation of the creative product itself. It may do so according to what appear as absolute criteria, but such criteria are mutable and always subject to the unceasing shaping of time. For example, some compositions, recordings and popular songs have enjoyed considerable critical and commercial success that has subsequently proved ephemeral, whilst others, often less recognised initially, have endured and become ‘classics’. The recordings of Robert Johnson, the compositions of Ruth Crawford Seeger, and the soundtracks to 1970s blaxploitation movies are cases in point, where their methods of production have

retrospectively been re-assessed as more 'creative' and 'inspired' than recognised in contemporary judgements of the time, or where an earlier local recognition of their creative character has subsequently become more universally acknowledged. Regardless of the processes through which this shift occurs, the reasons for its occurrence and the evaluative principles applied are what generally go uninspected. The emphasis has been far more on certain kinds of art which possess a transcendental quality, any reference to which is generally the point at which analysis itself begins to evaporate.

A third and related point is the way that the idea of creative activity has retained an integral distinction between a type of inspired, 'real' or 'authentic' creativity and a more routine, self-conscious, manipulative and false sense of the term. This dichotomy is apparent in the appeal to the spontaneity of creativity in Lennon's reflections on his 'transcription' of 'real music', and its contrast with material produced as a result of the contractual obligations to deliver new recordings of 'original' songs. This duality can be found formulated in different ways throughout the history of the concept and the gradual process of secularisation, or quasi-secularisation, leading to the shift of emphasis onto human capacity, with its accompanying transfer of originality, of bringing into existence, from God to the human imagination. This was a decisive break, though it would only be realised as such in retrospect. The vital need of imagination in creative practices is often cited as necessary for originality or innovation to occur, and the serious nature of the claim is partly established by the distinction between innovation and novelty. The negative equation of pleasure and novelty has remained powerful, particularly in association with light entertainment and specific devalued types of popular music. For example, in the early twentieth century certain songs were referred to as novelty songs or numbers, usually delivering a short, comic narrative which a mid-century jazz historian described, in pejorative terms, as depending on 'some obvious contrivance for its appeal, such as a reorganised nursery rhyme or an infectious sort of gibberish' (Ulanov, 1952: 352).

It is probably impossible to get away from contrasts between novelty and innovation in developing any understanding of both the phenomenology of musical creativity and its use as a descriptive term. Yet we do need to be wary of how they have been mapped onto a distinction between exclusive and inclusive approaches, which in turn have been harnessed to ongoing debates about elitism and populism. From an exclusive perspective, human creativity is firmly associated with 'originality' while 'innovation' requires unique, insightful and inspired musicians, singers, writers and composers. In contrast, a more inclusive approach uses the term to refer to a task executed with considerable skill, a problem solved with imagination and panache, an act performed with grace, vivacity or élan, or even an interpretation of a particular artefact such as a song or film score which is judged to be particularly insightful, or at least ingenious. These widened applications of the term, where the reference is to whatever is positively commended, now seem to be potentially without limit. There is, nevertheless, a sharp descent in the conventional value of the term when it is used to designate such commercial practices as 'creative advertising copy' or 'creative accounting'. Although such designations are at times deliberately ironic, the expanded conception of creativity they are part of imbues the most banal of habitual working practices with an aura of artistic inspiration, human worth and social good, as with the commonplace use of 'creative' to distinguish product designers from executives in the advertising industry. Whilst the expanded conception is, at least for some people, motivated by a democratic impulse against forms of elitism, it slips too easily into populist trivialisation, embracing and celebrating as creative all manner of routine everyday discursive practices, postmodern ironic strategies, appropriations, decodings, re-writings and 'symbolic' resistance.

Such a divergence of meaning and value leads to various problems. Stress on the rarity of originality retains traces of an elitist approach to culture and social life, whereby certain gifted or mystically inspired individuals have creative abilities, and the rest do not, being able to do efficiently only that which they have been socialised into, or acquired through formal training. An exclusivist emphasis then denies the possibility of a reflexive, critical or analytical perspective to a process whose wellsprings are held to lie at a psychically deeper level than the one at which rational thinking and analysis operates. The appeal is then to metaphysical, religious or unconscious sources of the creative faculties. Strong retentions of mystical or metaphysical explanations of creativity are found when, for example, singers, performers or dancers explain their creative acts as inspired by, and derived from, the experience of some divine or transcendental entity. Similar continuities apply when all manner of musical artists speak of not being in control of their own body or thought process when composing, writing or improvising.

We can neither accept nor dismiss these as metaphorical conceits or misguided delusions. They are integral to the issue we're concerned with. Although we live in an apparently cynical and knowing postmodern age, we have still to engage with religious and metaphysical explanations of creative inspiration because of the ways in which they distil important spiritual and aesthetic concerns for many people.

The distinctions we have been referring to are common enough, but we must always be careful to avoid polarising them into absolute differences, as for example when an opposition is set up between artistic vision and humdrum, mechanical life. This can only diminish our understanding of the range and scope of the creative process. Its diverse realisations in particular cultural and historical circumstances cannot be reduced to this stark opposition. Furthermore, these tensions, dichotomies and contrasting perspectives cannot simply be resolved at a theoretical or conceptual level, for they have their source in the tangible, sensory experiences that coincide with the creative act. Yet when confronted with these divergent meanings, there is a tendency for many writers to attempt to resolve them by prioritising one or the other. This may, for example, be done either by claiming that only a select few – Plato, Dante, Hegel – are truly creative (Steiner, 2001; Conrad, 2007), or by arguing that all everyday actions are potentially creative and adopting a dismissive or sceptical stance towards any notion of exceptionality (Joas, 1996; Willis, 1990).

In contrast, we believe that creativity should be reconceptualised as at once ordinary *and* exceptional. This entails rethinking, in relational terms, the notion of genius. Clearly, the category of genius emerges from a very particular historical epoch and geographical region, associated with European Romanticism. It has been adopted in a manner which lends support to an aesthetically restrictive and socially divisive canon and rationalises the existence of educational institutions and pedagogic practices privileging a small minority. But the fact that the great praise and attention accorded to various individuals, and the artworks or products associated with them, may have served certain ideological interests in the past, doesn't mean that they or their achievements are utterly subsumed by these interests.

Failure to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of exceptionality is a major shortcoming of the sociology of art. In exploring the dynamics of art, creativity and cultural production, we may look to such sociologists as Janet Wolff, Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu, but what we find is that exceptionality is evaded or avoided. It tends to be sociologised away. For understandable reasons, it is rejected as ideological, concealed within an analysis of the consensual codes and conventions of art worlds, or barely

acknowledged amidst struggles for position and recognition across different fields of production (see e.g. Wolff, 1981; Becker, 1976 and 1982; Bourdieu, 1983 and 1993). For the music sociologist, Tia DeNora, creative genius can only be explained by reference to its institutional acceptance as a cultural resource both initially, and then by succeeding generations. Beethoven's rise to eminence, for example, provided a cultural resource for the development of high musical aesthetics during the early nineteenth century. His rise has to be understood sociologically in terms of the 'mobilising resources, presentation devices, and practical activities that produced Beethoven's cultural authority' (DeNora, 1997: 189), for otherwise we could fall prey to the mystical notion of his individual, charismatic gift, as others have done. For DeNora, originality is beside the point, for genius presumes a 'natural' hierarchy of talent, 'as if this distribution existed outside of our attempts to frame questions about it' (ibid: 190). Genius is thus, through and through, an ideological category. It is ideological because it covertly reproduces hierarchical structures of power and obscures the social conditions and struggles within which reputations and sources of cultural authority are produced. The question becomes not who has creative talent, or who is a genius, but what talents become recognised and legitimated *as* creative in specific social circumstances.

DeNora's study of Beethoven is of considerable interest in what it says about the social context and cultural politics of Beethoven's Vienna. Her general position, which is considerably indebted to Becker and Bourdieu, is that artistic reputations are historically produced, and that cultural authority may be reinforced by various social and political investments. This is certainly a salutary counter to stock notions of hereditary powers or sublimated energies, but the problem with the theoretical framework she imposes on cultural creativity is that it is seen entirely as the consequence of social conditions and forces. In assuming that works and performances are valued solely for reasons connected to institutionally accredited power and privilege, the clear imputation is that the reputation of genius is only a matter of social fabrication, as if there nothing more to genius than the politics of its construction.

In seeking to demystify the Romantic myth of Beethoven as archetypal genius, DeNora argues his genius away. For Peter Kivy (2001), this is the result of a narrow sociological formalism. Beethoven's music, his most significant achievement, is ignored by DeNora, or at least severely downgraded in favour of attention to social interests and intrigues in the historical context within which Beethoven lived and worked.

Another sociologist who has attempted to grapple directly with the question of exceptionality and explicitly with the notion of 'genius', but in a quite different manner, is Norbert Elias (1993) in his unfinished work on Mozart, edited and published posthumously. As with Bourdieu (and others) Elias considered social context to be crucial to any understanding of 'a "genius", an exceptionally gifted creative human being' who, in this particular case, was 'born into a society which did not yet know the Romantic concept of genius, and whose social canon had no legitimate place for the highly individualised artist of genius in their midst' (1993: 19). For Elias, the changing social relations between the producers and consumers of art works are of central importance. With Mozart this involved composing during the breakdown of aristocratic patronage and the emergence of freelance artists facing an anonymous and atomised public as their market. Unlike the emphasis Bourdieu places on the 'objective' relations of fields, and the external contexts within which artists are formed, Elias argues for a need to bring together such an external 'he-perspective' with that of 'an I-perspective ... the standpoint of his own feelings' (7). Whether or not Elias manages to achieve this in an admittedly fragmentary work is debatable, but he does offer pointers to the importance of experience via the social-

psychological emphasis he places on a process of sublimation – by which he means the ability of an individual to self-reflexively monitor and control the spontaneous and free-flowing fantasy and dreams of their autonomous mental play and to harmonise these with aesthetic conventions and the social canon without losing their spontaneity. It is to this aspect of the creative experience that we now turn in more detail, attending in particular to how such a process of sublimation must, at some point, communicate to a public body.

Creative expression and the communication of experience

In this section we place the communication of experience as central to the understanding of creativity for three reasons. First, experience only acquires meaning and resonance once it has been creatively worked on, shared and distributed. Second, songs and music (and artworks more generally) are regularly valued for what they say to people about experience and for the creative quality with which they say it. Third, an emphasis on experience can help counter the tendencies to relegate artistic practices to the status of industrial manufacture, to equate aesthetic value with political worth, and to abstract the affective dimension of creativity into ‘objective’ sociological structures.

Experience does not arise out of an empty box. Industrial production, political context and social conditions are of critical importance for how we understand cultural creativity. But they do not tell us the whole story of the relations between creativity and the communication of experience. If we’re to move beyond formula-driven approaches to thinking about creativity, we need to tackle the relations between experience and its communicative forms.

For us it is a mistake to think that an artwork or cultural product is the expression of feelings, ideas, or values which exist independently of the creative product and simply result from the intention to communicate them. They only exist as objectively realised in an expressive medium. Expression in this sense presses experience into meaningful shape through the words, images and sounds given to it. In referring to expression we’re not suggesting that a musician, songwriter or performer is engaged in directly relaying either a pre-given psychological state or social experience. Instead, it is within their art and practice that they give a voice to or convey a potent sense of such states and experiences as combinations of sounds, words and imagery. Musicians or songwriters are not simply aware of the prior meaning of what they feel in their hearts and then duly find the words and melodic structure to express this feeling. That is a romantic fallacy. What is felt is mediated by the lyrics, rhythm or beat as a form of creative expression. It is realised in sounds, words and gestures, for psychological states of experience like love or anger are given form by the language and music in which they achieve expression even though they don’t consist entirely of this expression. The expression itself partly forms them, in dynamic interaction with known or intuitively sensed inter-emotional states or feelings.

If this sounds rather abstract we can introduce a couple of simplified examples to illustrate the point. A songwriter may decide to write a sad song, regardless of how they’re feeling at that moment. A painter may wish to convey a sense of anger at the atrocities of war. We may hear the song or see the painting and interpret it as an example of someone condensing his or her experience into song form or pictorial representation and then relaying it to us. But the act of expressing whatever sadness or anger we may recognise and relate to is realised in the act of making the song and painting. It doesn’t exist in some pure or prior state which words, music or paint then approximate in some way or other. And while different media may impart certain features and characteristics to an expressive form, they do not in themselves account for the significance of what is communicated.

So we don't have a fully formed, reflexively comprehended experience which we then reproduce in verbal or sonic form. What this experience means to us, and how we may value it, is usually only discovered in the form of utterance or figuration that is given to it. The expression forms the experience but also transforms it, makes it into something whose meaning changes our understanding of it. The relationship between experience and its expression is one of mutual constitution. Without its representation in words or sounds an experience often doesn't signify for us at all, for a feeling or an idea associated with it is made manifest through the combination of materials that characterise any particular cultural representation. It's because of this that songwriters, composers, musicians are often surprised at what they create and often only retrospectively comprehend what they were attempting to articulate.

Cultural creativity is realised within specific regimes of representation, according to quite obvious stylistic and generic codes and conventions. Yet what occurs when creative expression connects with these regimes and conventions does not entail an endless reproduction of their antecedent patterns and meanings. If that were the case the cultural world would simply stand still. The moment of creativity occurs when we wrestle with existing cultural materials in order to realise what they do not in themselves give to us. A number of writers, as diverse as Edward De Bono (1996), Arthur Koestler (1964), Ulf Hannerz (1996) and Salman Rushdie (1991), have stressed how the creative act involves recombining existing materials in such a way as to bring them into new relations with each other. This means working both within and against aesthetic genres and social canons. It means going beyond the already signified. As this occurs we can locate tiny steps and big strides, along with multiple gradations in between. In focusing on electronic forms of dance music, Jason Toynbee gives examples of small shifts which cumulatively lead to changes within a field-like 'radius' of creativity. He stresses the little changes, which are both cumulative and collective. But is it necessarily the case that 'the unit of creativity is a small one'? (Toynbee, 2000: 35).

There may be occasions when the new combinations are more radical, disruptive and profound. For example, the saxophonist Charlie Parker has often been cited as someone at one with the material they're playing, aware of what they intended to do and seeking constantly to wrestle with existing cultural materials in order to move beyond them. In Ken Burns's series of television documentaries, simply entitled *Jazz*, Parker is referred to as a genius by both Wynton Marsalis and Gary Giddins. Both speak of Parker the person as a genius, but acknowledge the particular moment for which the genius label is usually applied. This is Parker's realisation during one performance – which seems obvious now only in retrospect – that he could 'fly' away from the root notes of a chord yet still return to them. The notion that improvisation could be based upon the possibilities suggested by the underlying chord changes rather than the existing melody, and that this allowed frequent movements into the upper register, opened up a whole new range of possibilities and changed the course of jazz and popular music. Giddins refers to this as 'the revelation that became the basis of his music' (1998: 264). The inspired moment when this realisation came to Parker is conventionally dated to the night when he was engaged in a practice jam session at Dan Wall's chili joint prior to his main performance of the evening. As Parker recalled:

I remember one night before Monroe's I was jamming in a chili house on Seventh Avenue between 139th and 140th. It was December 1939. Now I'd been getting bored with the stereotyped changes that were being used all the time at the time, and I kept thinking there's bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes but I couldn't play it.

Well, that night I was working with 'Cherokee' and, as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of the chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive (ibid: 264).

Parker's explanation provides an insight into the quite conscious way that he was searching for a manner of overcoming the existing conventions. His telling comment is that he could hear it, but he couldn't play it until that quicksilver moment when he suddenly slid through the difference between hearing and playing and so dispelled it. He came intensively alive, as if freed from what had previously constrained him. That moment didn't simply appear, as if from nowhere. Since his teens Parker had carried around a note book in which he would make constant entries, often after watching other performers in concert. He became a great fan of Art Tatum, and there is surely some resonance between Tatum's flourishes and Parker's flying. Parker learned from other performers, Coleman Hawkins among them. That was all part of the preparation for this moment. It occurred on an ordinary everyday occasion, and previous to it was all the accumulated time spent on becoming proficient enough in his art to arrive at that feeling of dissatisfaction with the then regularised structure and style of playing, and to have intuitively ascertained 'something else' fresh beyond it. Without its many antecedent steps he couldn't have reached that vital shift in his mode of playing where the improvisation then took him.

This changed everything. It was a moment of genius. It not only became etched into Parker's memory. It also charted a completely new direction in the history of jazz and popular music. In this sense it was extraordinary. Parker was in that moment both the possessor and the possessed, a musician who had become totally absorbed in what he was trying consciously to achieve, and so at one with the endeavour that he produced an instant of magic. Such moments of inspiration – and again we have to resort to metaphor to attempt to describe them – are deeply embedded in the struggle to find just the right form of expressive communication for what the artist wants to say, play or convey. They don't come from outside, as if by a touch from a divine finger.

Achieving Communicative Value

We follow Williams in seeing creativity as an inclusive rather than exclusive ability. To see creativity as socially inclusive means that the 'true importance of our new understanding of perception and communication is that it verifies the creative activity of art in terms of a general human creativity' (1961: 41). Whilst this statement may have harboured intimations of the subsequent drift towards cultural populism, Williams was quick to stress that the resulting art *can* be valued: 'we find not only great art but bad art' and infinite gradations between. The critical disparity is not one which can be sought in attempting to grade 'different practice and intention' since it arises as a consequence of the quality of the relationship between experience and communication. In other words, creativity should be judged in terms of its ability to communicate 'the description of an experience' and its potential for this to be shared: art is the 'organisation of experience, especially in its effect on a spectator or an audience' (47). To succeed, art must 'convey an experience to others in such a form that the experience is actively re-created – not contemplated, not examined, not passively received, but by response to the means, actually lived through, by those to whom it is offered. At this stage, a number of art-works already fail ...' (51)

We revisit this line of thinking in the early work of Williams, partly because, unlike his extended discussion of the idea of culture, it has been relatively neglected, and also because it does at least suggest an alternative route away from idealist and reductionist conceptions of creativity focused solely on practices rather than the consequences of their reception. There are, we acknowledge, various problems raised by Williams' approach to cultural creativity. One is the transmission model of communication which seems to underpin it, and here we stress that in arguing for a communicative approach to creativity we are not endorsing a transmission or an encoding/decoding model. Instead, our emphasis is on the experiential and phenomenological aspects through which musical forms acquire value and connect with others. This is not necessarily semiotic and may frequently be non-representational in narrowly semantic terms. In addition, we do not follow Williams in assuming a homological relation between art and experience. This has been a key theme in much writing about popular music. It can be detected in the subcultural sociological tradition of explaining the connection between musical style and social location through notions of structural homologies (notably Willis, 1990; Hebdige, 1979).

Among other writers, Williams placed a central emphasis on a 'sharing' of (and willingness to 'share') the artistically realised expression of experience as it is 'actually lived through'. This might presuppose a prior consensus as the basis on which such culturally shared activities can occur. Musical creativity is often shared despite such a consensus and within conditions of social and aesthetic conflict. This is why we stress that communication does not mean the study of a pre-sealed 'message' which is simply 'transmitted'. A related difficulty with Williams is that what is actually entailed in judgements of value about this process – the process of creatively turning 'unique experience into common experience' – remains underdeveloped in his thought where he writes of creativity being 'at once ordinary and extraordinary' and 'known and unknown' (1977: 211-12). Nonetheless, Williams's was grappling with how the creative process inclines towards the universal and how, although culture is ordinary, the ordinary can become transformed into the extraordinary. The ways in which what is historically specific and locally known moves across and between place and period, to be recognised by later generations in quite different locations, are features of the very process of communication that we wish to foreground. As Elias noted, this 'open question' is too often 'disguised as an eternal mystery' (1993: 54).

It is not surprising that neither Williams nor Elias resolved these issues and that both thinkers left us with unfinished work that 'concludes' in a tentative and open manner. But it is significant that they didn't seek to close these questions down. Williams's own contribution facilitated the turn from the 'text in itself'. The point of trying to understand creativity in terms of the quality of communicated experience and the forms in which such experience is actively re-created is that it refuses the reification of the musical work, the recording or the performance. Reification in this sense occurs when the artwork or performance is conceived in abstract isolation, as a text or practice removed from the social contexts of which it is or was a component part.

Reification in musical analysis relates to the still prevalent view that music, particularly that selectively identified and canonised as 'great', has an intrinsic autonomy that raises it above the social and political world. This autonomy guarantees its greatness. Reified musical aesthetics have been applied not only to art music but also to forms of popular music. For example Carl Engel, in an organicist metaphor adopted without acknowledgement by Cecil Sharp, described what have become known as folk songs as akin to the 'wild flowers indigenous to a country, which thrive unaided by art' (Engel, 1866: 23; Sharp, 1907: 1). In England, during the later nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, this notion informed and supported the co-option of 'folk' music in the nationalist mission of its musical renaissance (Hughes and Stradling, 2001). But the aesthetics of 'music in itself' have had a much broader influence, acting for instance as a central tenet of professional musicology's maintenance of boundaries and enclosures and providing appropriate collateral for a 'life and works' paradigm of intellectual scholarship which fails to connect musical composition and structure to 'ideology, or social space, or power, or to the formation of an individual (and by no means sovereign) ego' (Said, 1991: xii-xiii).

Our emphasis on achieving communicative value through experience, developed from this critical engagement with Williams, is intended to connect music not only with these large-scale sociological issues, but also with the realisation of creative possibilities in everyday life. An example of what this involves, bringing 'art' and 'popular' music together and confounding their artificial separation, is the way in which Mahler drew on his childhood experience of apparently unrelated sounds coming from different directions, as for instance in his Third Symphony. Natalie Bauer-Lechner recalled a trip to a country fair with the composer:

Not only were innumerable barrel-organs blaring out from merry-go-rounds, see-saws, shooting galleries and puppet shows, but a military band and a men's choral society had established themselves there as well. All these groups, in the same forest clearing, were creating an incredible musical pandemonium without paying the slightest attention to each other. Mahler exclaimed: 'You hear? That's polyphony, and that's where I get it from!' (cited Mitchell, 1975: 342).

If a specific experience being communicated doesn't become part of a broader configuration of practices and human relations, its meanings or sentiments are unlikely to register. Its communicative possibilities will go unrealised. What is communicated as interpreted experience enters into a series of encounters between old and new cultural forms and practices, traditional and emergent ways of seeing, listening, and thinking about the world, as suggested in the above reference to Mahler. Williams referred to this process as the testing of new observations, comparisons and meanings in experience, occurring in any cultural formation in ways that are 'always both traditional and creative' and that involve 'both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings'. It is then the conjunction of creative effort and common meanings which is significant, within the networks of relationship in which people find value in and through each other (Williams, 1989: 4 and 283).

This insight is important because it is only in and through the continuities and changes that potential participation becomes possible. The evaluative or emotional response to experience we're focusing on operates in the space between general purposes and individual meanings, between coming together in experience and exploring experience for what it means for us in our own understanding and self-knowledge. It involves going beyond the local whilst also recognising the value of localised experience and practice as we try to relate the particular to the general, the abstract to the concrete, the unit to the universal. These negotiations can also involve an open recognition of the contrasts between different cultural traditions and ideals, and generate the impetus to move beyond them towards more open forms of social and cultural relations which can never be fully settled or fixed. Although the meanings and values which we find in music operate in relation to their specific fields of production and performance and their specific genre codes and social conventions, the achievement of communicative value always has the potential to exceed its local and immediate conditions of production: 'cultures and traditions survive and

flourish not by enforcing an endless and exact reproduction but by developing and enriching themselves and by remaining relevant to new generations' (Warnke, 1995: 139-40). Enrichment and a sense of remaining relevance therefore depend on a dialogue with difference as much as a connection with changing times.

We make this point to argue that creativity arises not from a cultural context which exists in monolithic isolation, but in their borrowings from each other. Mozart's exposure, on tours as a young child, to significant contemporary compositions in Germany, France, Italy and England, and his understanding and love of the musical frivolous as much as the profound (during an epoch prior to the high/ popular cultural split) meant that his aesthetic sensibility was formed from a sense of movement across cultural boundaries. Likewise, many years later, Duke Ellington's boundary-less musical journey, always pushing up against the social walls of racism, formed his self-conscious desire to be 'beyond category' (Hasse, 1995; Lees, 1988: 55). As Edward Said observed, culture 'is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures' (1994: 261-2).

The permeability of cultures, languages and aesthetic codes is a condition of their constant change and a source of creative movement and vitality, yet this is inevitably realised locally by embodied people in particular conditions and through quite specific experiences. Interpreted experience as we encounter it in a song or musical performance is always re-interpreted in relation to what we ourselves bring to it and what we attempt to take from it. We do not engage with it in some pristine or insular mode of apprehension, nor does our encounter with it result in some abstract act of transparent understanding. Our understanding of it is based on the degree to which we realise and exceed the finite illusion of the mutual separation of cultures and histories. This is where our imaginative grasp of the possibilities posed by different cultures, traditions and languages becomes a locus of creative extension of our own temporally and spatially specific cultural experience. It is the creation of an enduring relationship between the 'near' and the 'far' which becomes a key dynamic of cultural change and creative renewal.

Moments and movements

Beginning this article by untangling some of the meanings of creativity enabled us to point to the endurance of a spiritual dimension within the term even as its semantic range has widened and become secularised. The development of the term demands that we move away from elitist conceptions of creative exclusivity and consider creativity in its more mundane forms. At the same time, this does not require the relinquishment of some conception of exceptionality. We've argued that it is now this fuller range of meanings and associations which must be engaged with, rather than some preferred version which simply swings to the polar opposite of elitist values. That's why we've adopted an approach which conceives of creativity in terms of the communication of experience. We've suggested that this provides one route into a consideration of the mutually constitutive relation between the ordinariness and exceptionality of creativity. It is through this relation, conceived in this way, that music can move between specifically local moments of production and initial recognition and patterns of reception and assimilation which are broader both geographically and historically. If communication is about going outwards from self to other, we're still searching for adequate ways of explaining how everyday localised creativity is able, in certain ways at certain times, to achieve connections across different cultural and historical formations, and in so doing to engage with and give expression to

common (but by no means identical) experiences. Creativity achieves its concrete forms in these movements of expression, engagement and connection.

This is not a search for some universal principle. It is about trying to comprehend the dynamic movement which brings cultural practices together to form meta-cultural frameworks of comprehension, meaning and communication. To argue for moments of musical genius – we use the word deliberately – in the life histories and cultural careers of Benjamin Britten, Blind Willie Johnson or Björk is not to suggest that they have created universal, trans-historical works of art which we share simply because we are ‘human’ (even though many people, across divergences of time and space, *do* engage with their music). It is not because they project a shared sense of identity, or because a common meaning forges an absolute unity of creator and listener. It is because their particular moments of expressive art allow all sorts of people a point of entry which enables participation in the work, perhaps initially by cutting through or challenging aural prejudices and habits of listening, but always by realising an almost tangible sense of connection between what is performed and what is lived. These moments and movements are something to be celebrated, but not mystified. Musical talent is always in part the result of hard work, experimentation and continual effort spent in perfecting a craft along with a passionate will to push against existing forms and conventions, and a desire to communicate beyond immediate temporal and spatial boundaries. As this occurs, moments of genius are both ordinary and exceptional and we can appreciate creativity as both an ordinary and exceptional experience. It is this which leads us to argue that musical creativity should be thought of as the communication of experience which always involves gradations of movement between the mundane and exceptional, between novelty and innovation, and between the immediate and the distant. This movement is what we celebrate, and understanding it may give us even more to celebrate.

BARBER, L. (1999) ‘Simply Divine’, *The Observer*, 28 February.

BECKER, H. (1976) ‘Art worlds and social types’, *American Behavioural Scientist*, 19, 703-18.

BECKER, H. (1982) *Art Worlds*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

BOURDIEU, P. (1983) ‘The field of cultural production, or: the economic world reversed’, *Poetics*, 12, 311-56.

BOURDIEU, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge: Polity.

BOURDIEU, P. (1996) *The Rules of Art*, Cambridge: Polity.

CONRAD, P. (2007) *Creation: Artists, Gods and Origins*, London: Thames & Hudson.

DE BONO, E (1996) *Serious Creativity*. Harper Collins, London.

DENORA, T (1997) *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius*, Berkeley; Univ of California press.

ELIAS, N. (1993) *Mozart: Portrait of a Genius*, Cambridge: Polity.

ENGEL, C. (1866) *An Introduction to the Study of National Music*, London: Longman.

- GARNHAM, N. (2005) 'From Cultural to Creative Industries: An analysis of the implications of the "creative industries" approach to arts and media policy making in the United Kingdom', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 11:1, 15-29.
- GIDDINS, G. (1998) *Visions of Jazz*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HANNERZ, U (1996) *Transnational Connections*, Routledge: London.
- HASSE, J (1995) *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*. Da Capo, New York.
- HEBDIGE, D (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen, London.
- HEYLIN, C (2000) *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades, Take Two*, Penguin.
- HUGHES, M. AND STRADLING, R. (2001) *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840-1940*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- JOAS, H (1996) *The Creativity of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- KIVY, P. (2001) *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, and the Idea of Musical Genius*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- KOESTLER, A (1964) *The Act of Creation*, Hutchinson & Co, London (?)
- LEES, G. (1988) *Meet Me at Jim and Andy's: Jazz Musicians and their World*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGUIGAN, J. (1998) 'National Government and the Cultural Public Sphere', *Media International Australia*, 87, 68-83.
- MITCHELL, D. (1975) *Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years*, London: Faber & Faber.
- RUSHDIE, S (1991) *Imaginary Homelands*, London: Granta.
- SAID, E. (1991) *Musical Elaborations*, London: Chatto and Windus.
- SAID, E. (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage.
- SCHLESINGER, P. (2007) 'Creativity: From Discourse to Doctrine?', *Screen*, 48, 3, 377-387[
- SHARP, C. (1907) *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions*, London: Simpkin & Co.
- STEINER, G. (2001) *Grammars of Creation*, London: Faber and Faber.
- ULANOV, B. (1952) *A History of Jazz in America*, New York: Viking Press.
- WARNKE, G. (1995) 'Communicative Rationality and Cultural Values' in White, S. K. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

WATERS, J (1988) 'Deus ex Machina: The Band Who Grew to Earth' in E. Dunphy *The Unforgettable Fire: The Story of U2*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

WILLIAMS, R (1961) *The Long Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

WILLIAMS, R (1976) *Keywords*. Glasgow: Fontana.

WILLIAMS, R (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

WILLIAMS, R. (1989) *Resources of Hope*, London and New York: Verso.

WILLIS, P. (1990) *Common Culture*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

WOLFF, J. (1981) *The Social Production of Art*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan.

© Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, 2008.