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Title: Keith Gildart, Images of England through Popular Music: Class, Youth and Rock 'n' Roll

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Keith Gildart, *Images of England through Popular Music: Class, Youth and Rock 'n' Roll, 1955-1976* (2013), x + 290 (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, £55.00/\$85.00 hardback).

In recent years popular music scholarship has attempted to shift its focus away from the dominant Anglo-American idioms that have been so influential over the previous century towards a more diverse and inclusive model. While this shift has seen a burgeoning literature on a wealth of music practice and consumption from around the world, much of it previously marginalised and obscure in terms of scholarship and mainstream attention, it has brought with it a sense that perhaps too much focus has been placed on what one might call 'rock 'n' roll and everything after' in America and Europe. While it is certainly understandable that the most visible aspects of Anglo-American popular music have been covered in some depth, that is not to say that the scholarship surrounding popular music should be necessarily thought of as concluded or at least temporarily suspended. The very diversity of approaches to the study of popular music suggests that there might always be new things to say, new perspectives to be brought to bear on what might at first seem very familiar material. As such Keith Gildart's *Images of England through Popular Music: Class, Youth and Rock 'n' Roll, 1955-1976* might be treading territory that often seems already well-covered, yet it does provide scope to reappraise the story of the development of post- rock 'n' roll culture in the UK in a number of interesting ways.

In essence Gildart's project is to reassess the role of class consciousness in the story of British popular music from its first encounters with American rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues through to 1970s punk. This is achieved through a blended focus on oral and documentary testimony that provides a sense of time and place for those fans and consumers involved in a variety of scenes, as well as a structure that places key musical figures such as Georgie Fame, Ray Davies and David Bowie as representatives and narrators of changing

relationships to class in Britain at particular times. It is easy to be wary of what one might consider to be a hero narrative of British popular music culture, one that might suit his thesis whilst omitting other perspectives, but Gildart does well to balance the role of the star with the role of the fan and consumer, treating both as part of a spectrum of engagement with class identification.

Gildart is reacting to much recent popular music scholarship that has sought to distance itself from the very class-based analysis often characterised by the output of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and others through the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed his approach seems rather antiquated on first inspection, but it is in the detail that Gildart shows the often contested nature of social class as it is shaped by and reacts to Anglo-American popular music through the latter half of the twentieth century. The book is divided into three parts, the first charting the uptake of rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues in the UK, first in the northern towns of Leigh and Wigan, then London and finally in Liverpool. Georgie Fame acts as a narrative thread that illuminates the ways in which popular music was used both to identify young people with their class background, and to differentiate themselves from it. For Gildart the exotic American (often black) sounds permeating British popular culture in the 1950s acted as a means of both escaping and negotiating Northern working class identities. The Beatles' equally provided a way to experience specific classed identities, at least until the point at which they outgrew their regional fanbase.

The focus of the second section is mod culture during the first half of the 1960s. Again, this is a well-documented area and treads similar ground to the work of Dick Hebdige, yet the rich detail of both fan testimony and literature provides a nuanced illustration of the varieties of mod experience, both within and without the capital. Here the hero narrative aspect incorporates The Who's Pete Townsend and The Kinks' Ray Davies, but Gildart takes

care to present them as emblematic and representative of wider social concerns. Mod's ambivalent relationship to class is neatly expressed, particularly through Davies' complex songwriting trajectory that seems at times both bound to and deeply resistant of his socialist suburban background.

The final section of Gildart's text focuses on the rise of glam rock and then punk in the UK in the mid-seventies. For Gildart acts such as Slade provided a form of glam inherently tied to working class culture, whilst Bowie managed to cross social boundaries and offer working class consumers ways to both challenge their social backgrounds and attendant notions of masculinity and femininity. Punk, meanwhile, explored specifically through The Sex Pistols' regional tour of 1976, provided a precarious balancing act between class identification and a critique of the ruptures that working class communities were experiencing at the time.

If Gildart's thesis is to resuscitate the role of class in the narrative of popular music history, he goes some way to achieving that aim. He is the first to point out that the text is not a heavy-weight sociological study, but rather he provides a narrative that engages both with the national and the specifically local to provide a nuanced reading of class consciousness as it engages with popular music. The story might not seem new, but it is in the detail of testimony and source that *Images of England* successfully sketches out both the social and the imaginary terrain of youth experience at a time of great social change in the UK. The result never proposes a one-size-fits-all model of youth class identities, but it does provide a map of the fluid and contested nature of social class at specific historical moments, and the ways in which popular music not only provided a soundtrack to it, but helped shaped it in the minds of many young people with ramifications that we still experience to this day.

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