

## “Hand in Glove”

### Punk, Post-punk, and Poetry

Martin Malone

In her 2007 book, *The Importance of Music to Girls*, the poet Lavinia Greenlaw states that “Punk didn’t just change what I listened to and how I dressed. It altered my aesthetic sense completely. This is what music could do: change the shape of the world and my shape within it, how I saw, what I liked and what I wanted to look like.”<sup>1</sup> Such radical changes brought about by music surely extend, for Greenlaw and others alike, to poetic development, possibility, and attitude: to the fanciful “growth of a poet’s mind,” as William Wordsworth termed it. Indeed, as the ex-Oxford Professor of Poetry and current UK Laureate, Simon Armitage, notes in his book *Gig: The Life and Times of a Rock-star Fantasist*, “only through the process of failing to become a rock star have I become a writer.”<sup>2</sup> And Christopher James, in a 2012 article for the Poetry Society, has quoted my own observation that “Even if you’ve won the T.S. Eliot Prize, chances are that you’ve still been to more gigs than poetry readings and bought more records than poetry books.”<sup>3</sup> Such sentiments, indicative of the long-sensed relationship between poetry, music, and song, occur frequently enough within casual or autobiographical discourse. Yet there remains relatively little substantive scholarship on the subject, particularly that which traces the influence of this music upon the output of poets coming of age during the punk and post-punk period. I intend to show in this chapter how this music not only provided a deep well of convertible material for writers and poets, but instigated—as a shared history, symbology, and sense of newly granted artistic “permission”—a generational sensibility, and, within it, a uniquely hybridized version of the poet.

The first “New Generation Poets” of 1994 seem particularly suited to such scrutiny. As well as Armitage and Greenlaw, fellow members of this group have acknowledged links to the music which helped form their sensibilities. Don Paterson and Michael Dongahy, for example, are or were accomplished musicians. And other poets, who have made their way into the contemporary scene beyond the marketing construct of the “New Gen” cohort, also testify to the enduring influence of the music culture they grew up around. Indeed, some of them were formerly part of it: the Bloodaxe poet, Virginia Astley, for example, was a *doyenne* of the post-punk music scene, whose recent

collection *The English River* boasts a foreword by none other than Pete Townshend. Such cross-fertilization shouldn't surprise us—it has always been around—yet, the socio-cultural conditions of the punk and post-punk period provided particularly rich ground. In *Post-Punk Then and Now*, Kodwo Eshun refers to post-punk's “drive towards self-authorization,” while his co-editor Gavin Butt points out that “In its restlessness, its allusiveness, its over-reaching, post-punk vigorously affirmed the possibility that culture could be at once popular, experimental and intellectually-driven.”<sup>4</sup> The permissions granted by this period of literate and intellectually aspirational music found a natural extension into other areas of creative practice, nowhere more so than in the poetry subsequently written by its fans.

Though no member of the “New Gen” cohort, I do, at least, share their cultural demographic and confess that I've two dogs of my own in this fight. Since the age of sixteen, I've been a songwriter, singer, and guitarist in a succession of punk/post-punk/indie bands, releasing albums and singles along the way, and even working as a sound engineer/producer for several years. No great surprise, therefore, when, between 2008 and 2013, I joined Armitage as a guitarist in his “mid-life crisis” band, the Scaremongers, who would go on to release several singles as well as the album *Born In A Barn*, and appear on BBC Two's *The Culture Show* and at the 2009 Latitude Festival. After a lifetime in bands, I also now publish poetry; indeed, this is how I met Simon Armitage in the first place, having also failed to become a rock star. Such is the personal providence of this discussion, then, though it's also rooted in a generational coincidence that should surprise no one: the “children of punk and post-punk” would naturally filter through into wider culture, just as the hippy generation had done before them, bringing along the formative influences of their pasts. Clearly, there are special conditions facing each generation, though I'd not be alone in arguing that for the one under scrutiny here, there was a particularly marked drift toward synthesizing “low” and “high” cultures, and toward the end of eroding such false distinctions. The time appears right for a proper evaluation of this phenomenon. Like Gavin Butt, I aim to “assess the formative impact of this time upon my political and aesthetic values, as well as upon my mature intellectual and cultural preoccupations.”<sup>5</sup>

Academic distinctions are there to be drawn between the terms “punk” and “post-punk,” though, to most who lived through the period, their respective sensibilities *felt* much more seamless and in-the-moment than retrospective analysis might suggest. My focus is upon the through-flow of interrelated ideas which conditioned subjective, creative responses to both cultural phenomena as perceived by participants and fans alike. This means painting to some degree with large brush strokes regarding the two terms and their corresponding aesthetics—a discussion that, to be sure, could necessitate a volume of its own. Here, I intend to explore punk and post-punk's hand-in-glove relationship with the poetry it helped spawn—its formative impact and the sense of permission it appeared to grant—as part of a shared cultural moment and by way of exemplars. Central to this will be those acknowledgments made by the poets themselves, in their own writing or comments on the subject. This includes a phone conversation I had with Simon Armitage, during which we addressed the subject of musical influence. I shall, of course, be looking also at the poetry itself and trying to

articulate those properties which appear to be the direct product of acquired punk or post-punk sensibilities and vernacular. There are a number of obvious candidates here: Armitage poems like “Clown Punk” and “Don’t Sing (*for Paddy MacAloon*)” or Virginia Astley’s direct reminiscences of her musical career. However, I hope to also draw out a sense in which the influence of punk and post-punk culture is more substantive than the mere fact of its intuitive license *a la* Greenlaw. I’d like to reflect, too, that this relationship was very much reciprocal, and that musicians were drawing upon resources offered them from the neighboring bank of the creative river: a state of affairs acknowledged and documented at the time and in subsequent memoirs.

Let’s start with that phone conversation from a few years back, when the Scaremongers were still a going concern and we’d discussed this topic in passing. It was around the time that I was beginning to assess the formative impact of the punk/post-punk era upon my own “mature intellectual and cultural preoccupations.” The questions we considered, therefore, were geared toward drawing out the direct and indirect nature of those links between younger listening habits and “mature” creative practice.

**Martin Malone:** Can you direct me to any specific instances or lines where you feel you were consciously or subconsciously channeling moments from your record collection?

**Simon Armitage:** This is evident especially in the earlier poems when I thought that they might mean something. Poems like “Eighties/Nineties” in *Zoom*. There are occasions when I’ve used a song rhythm as a starter; for example, “Killing Time 2” consciously utilizes the rhythm of Bob Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues.” And on other occasions, I have chosen a song lyric as a starter, but the song has sort of died away as the writing has thickened itself. “Leaves On The Line,” for example, leaned on Nick Cave’s song “Into My Arms” but was leached out more and more by the writing. More recently, in *Seeing Stars* the poems: “Bringing It All Back Home,” “To The Bridge,” and “The Overtones” all have direct echoes but varying distances from sources—if that’s what we can call them—in song. Overall, though, I think it would be difficult to look at the style and form of my poems and make a lot of direct traces of lyrics and lines. In terms of actual practice, it’s more a question of style than anything else: I’ve always been drawn to a kitchen-sink style and the bands I like tended to do the same. This is just the sort of thing I like.

**MM:** My focus is—I suppose—those poets whose creative/aesthetic/social sensibilities were at least part-formed by early exposure to punk and then post-punk.

**SA:** The big relationship for me was attitudinal and comes from punk’s DIY ethos more than anything else. The musical franchise was extended by punk and I took that to mean the poetry franchise also. But this had sort of been going on since the war and myself and poets like Carol Ann Duffy were inheritors of that drift. Post-punk was even more important because to me that said something about solipsism and internal landscapes. At that time Indie was

a way of being involved musically but without having to participate in easy collectivism; it was still private and cool. You felt as if you were staking a claim in the margins; it was working outside of the mainstream. Attitudinally, that's what I felt I was doing in poetry at the time too. In the early stuff, there were a lot of traditional rhythms and forms working off these attitudes and a lot of American voices. So, I think punk and post-punk *became* democratizing because it was about access to that stuff.

**MM:** I've certainly found it that way, myself. And the importance cannot be exaggerated, of that permission granted to a working-class boy with no familial academic hinterland and limited access to what might be termed "establishment culture," by people like Morrissey and Paul Weller or (in my case) Richard Jobson of the Skids. Each was intellectually aspirational and suggested the existence of role models from my own class and similar background. How about you?

**SA:** I'm classic *no-brow*. I think I belong to a generation that feels unembarrassed to talk about the importance of music; to talk about it in terms of high art forms, to feel comfortable with that concept.

**MM:** I couldn't agree more. Indeed, encouraged by the times and their apparent permission to think of popular music as an art form as worthy of scrutiny as any other, I think we patented this acculturative response; far more than, say, the 1960s generation with their "Dylan-as-poet" tropes. That's not to dismiss them out of hand, I just feel that, perhaps thanks to their groundwork, our generation took it a lot further and, eventually I suppose, into the academy. Whether that's a good or bad thing for poetry *or* rock n' roll, I suppose time, technology, and "leisure opportunity" will tell.

As I write this in 2019, perhaps it is significant that Simon Armitage has gone back for another visit to the musical well: his latest "extracurricular" band project, a loose, ambient alliance called Land Yacht Regatta, is freshly signed to Universal. Introducing the "spoken-word" track "33 $\frac{1}{3}$ " on Radio 6's Radcliffe and Maconie Show, Armitage invokes generationally formative moments and memories, such as the death of Joy Division's Ian Curtis and the "redolent" sound of run-out grooves on vinyl.<sup>6</sup> All of which is consistent with the tenor of my conversation with him back in 2013. What both moments reveal is something of Adorno's "element of psychological transfer"<sup>7</sup> between a poet's listening habits around the popular music in whose presence his heart first opened and subsequent acts of self-authorization. Certainly, there appears to be some congruence between Armitage's extension of the musical "franchise" of punk into poetry and Gavin Butt's "vigorously affirmed" possibility, on behalf of post-punk, that culture could be at once popular and intellectually driven—both of which conjure a suggestion of Adorno's image of popular music as "the psychological household of the masses."<sup>8</sup> Where else might we find Armitage's "kitchen-sink" but in just such a household? This phenomenon of psychological transfer is not, after all, unnatural, and has its precursors: for instance, in her book *Stand In The Trench Achilles!*, Elizabeth Vandiver explores the relationship between classical literature and the formative

sensibilities of the Great War poets, describing an awareness of the Classics and their appropriated tropes as part of that generation's "furniture of the mind."<sup>9</sup> As Vandiver reminds us, at the time of the Great War, in the population at large, a "promiscuous" mix of high and low culture was the norm, and this was a historic moment of relatively high levels of literacy among the troops. This somewhat pre-echoes a state of affairs in the 1970s and 1980s, when school English Literature texts such as *Nine Moderns Poets* and *Poets of Our Time* were set before a generation of young minds also exposed to the ubiquitous soundtrack of punk and post-punk. In the UK at least, the same generation was the last to enjoy those egalitarian possibilities offered by fully funded tertiary education, with its lack of tuition fees and full maintenance grants to those poor enough to apply. This was, also, an era when music was a much more pressing cultural imperative than perhaps it is nowadays. Just as the First World War poets went on to "adduce" the Trojan War as a template for their modern conflict, their "New Gen" counterparts went on to adduce the contemporary music scene as part of their own sense of conflict and self-authorization. For each, the language, imagery, and sensibilities culled from such bespoke templates were part of its shared cultural capital. The burden of generational reality is clearly *very* different, but the cultural phenomenology is not. How might this have played out in the poetry which that later—more historically fortunate—generation went on to produce?

"Don't Sing," from Armitage's 1989 debut collection *Zoom!*, is of particular interest here since it clearly involves his poetic reception of a song in which the songwriter is, himself, processing his own reading of a literary work: in this case, Graham Green's novel *The Power and the Glory*. I think we see in the poem an instance of what Armitage described as "forms of working off" post-punk's politically engaged attitudes, an extension of the novel's repressive, South-American state to contemporaneous regimes like that of Augusto Pinochet in 1970s and 1980s Chile. While there are few material echoes, beyond the specific reference of the title, this poem is fascinating in two ways: first, it embodies the notion of rock music's (general) interconnectedness with literary preoccupations and, secondly, it exemplifies how Armitage was, indeed, and early on, developing his poetic voice by working through the cultural capital offered him by his listening. Tropes familiar to Armitage readers are clearly present—the easy conversational style half-masking darker matter—but, significant to my discussion is the fact that they arrive in this particular poem *by way of* his listening to a student playlist staple of the time:

Any kind of burial was impossible  
so we agreed that the next time a priest was around  
he might say a few words inside the hut, and that  
no one would go singing to the soldiers.<sup>10</sup>

And there are other, more explicit, examples of this transfer of recreational listening into literary contexts to be found elsewhere in Armitage's poetry, both early and more recent. As he was quick to point out, 2010's experimental assemblage of shaggy dog stories, *Seeing Stars*, contains a music-rich work called "The Overtones." This poem

archly references ten song titles by Derry punk-pop band the Undertones in a playfully ironic lyric stew that also has Casanova, the Arc de Triomphe, St. Michael's Mount, Don Quixote, and Radio 4 among its ingredients. In the same collection, there are other examples of his echoing of specific songs at varying distances from the source. In "Bringing it All Back Home," for example, as a result of "Googling [his] own name," the Dylan album title eases us into a *picaresque* stroll through the poet's own semi-fictionalized back pages in the company of an "Armitage Trail" guide called "Bob." While the pop references here may reflect more mature listening patterns, they also reflect a habit of mind that has been consistent throughout Armitage's career and which reflects his "classic *no-brow*" comment. Within the same collection, post-punk preoccupations (in this case, the issue of "credibility") are detectable in his light-hearted dismissal of later groups, such as the Manic Street Preachers and Red Hot Chili Peppers, "whereas the Teardrop / Explodes, either by blind accident or through / careful purpose had kept every promise ever made."<sup>11</sup> Such concerns, in whatever spirit they are rendered, remain signifiers of Armitage's cultural vintage. As he points out himself, the big relationship is "attitudinal," but there is more than a hint, also, of that "solipsism and internal landscape" which Armitage identified as having been crucial to both post-punk and his own development. Whatever else is going on here, there is certainly that generational comfort in talking about the importance of music in the context of a high art form.

I suggested earlier that such interdisciplinary relationships were very much two-way. Clearly, "the element of psychological transfer" between post-punk songwriters and their own *reading* habits were similarly cross-fertilized. We witnessed, above, an instance of Paddy McAloon's creative misprision of Graham Greene, for example, and David McComb, chief songwriter with Australian post-punk band the Triffids, provides one of the very many other examples from that period. The reciprocity of this relationship is underscored by *Beautiful Waste*, a collection of McComb's poetry posthumously published by Fremantle Press in 2009. The introduction is provided by John Kinsella, a highly regarded Australian poet, novelist, critic, essayist, and editor, who is also from Perth and a huge fan of the band. In it, Kinsella describes precisely the type of intellectual magpie fit for this discussion: "David did tertiary lit. studies. He was a musician from his early teenage years. This combination makes his position as a writer in Perth different in my era at least."<sup>12</sup> The profile fitted here to Western Australia in the late 1970s and 1980s was nonetheless growing more common throughout the world of popular music thanks, in no small part, to the permissive legacy of punk and post-punk. For example, in a moving memoir of his time with the Go-Betweens, Robert Forster recounts how he met his friend and fellow songwriter, Grant McLennan, at the University of Queensland in EN103, Introduction to Literature B.<sup>13</sup> In a 2016 promotional clip for Penguin Books Australia, Forster goes so far as to observe: "Sometimes I think that writers have been more influential on me than music."<sup>14</sup> I was fortunate enough to chat with him after a recent solo gig in Birmingham, where he kindly agreed to answer questions akin to those put to Armitage. His response serves to elucidate, beautifully, that reciprocity of influence is key to this discussion:

**MM:** Robert, you touched on this in *Grant & I*, but if you could address it here a bit more directly: Grant and yourself were very young when you started the Go-Betweens so, how much was this a formation which reflected musical and/or cultural inspirations?

**Robert Forster:** The band at the start was almost all about cultural references. Grant and I weren't whizz musicians or ones that had served any kind of standard rock and roll apprenticeships. That's what punk and post-punk allowed—people with ideas to slip through and gain attention. We looked at what we had to set us apart from normal groups, both inside and outside punk, and our fascination and enthusiasm for things outside of rock culture, be it film, books, and television, we thought offered ideas we could incorporate into the band's aesthetic, without us being too precious or condescending about it. Not be an "art band" but an artful pop band.

**MM:** Was your drift toward music some reflection of it appearing to grant greater cultural permission than the established literary canon? Or was it purely a reflection of the musical landscape of the times? I've read *Pig City*,<sup>15</sup> and I'm aware that Brisbane under the Bjelke-Petersen regime had its own situation to deal with or react to. People form bands for often complicated reasons, I guess, so could you share some of your thinking back then, some recollections in tranquility perhaps?

**RF:** I would have to say that under the Bjelke-Peterson government, stifling, as it did, any form of intellectualism or cultural activity or the idea of young people having fun—and given the geographical isolation of Brisbane—there didn't seem to be any kind of "permissions" in Brisbane in the late seventies. Little was on offer. You made your own moves. Not unrelated to this—one of the great things about starting a band at twenty, is that as soon as you start playing gigs in a decent-sized town, three or four hundred know you. If you are writing your own songs with your own words attached, you are reaching audiences. This is a powerful thing at twenty. Also, if you start recording and touring, the audience grows as does your profile. This doesn't happen to a writer or a filmmaker or playwright usually till they're thirty.

**MM:** My focus is—I suppose—those poets whose creative/aesthetic/social sensibilities were at least part-formed by early exposure to punk and then post-punk. When I put these questions to Simon Armitage he suggested that the big relationship was "attitudinal." Was there a reverse polarity at play in your music: that is, did the "high-brow" culture give you some of your "gut rot rock 'n' roll"?

**RF:** Grant and I both studied literature at Queensland University. I don't know if this is an answer to your question, but I think what we did was not shy away from, or try to deny, what we had learned at university. That was important, even if it did open us up to the accusation of being pretentious. It was part of our knowledge, why avoid it? And of course, it opened up new ways to say things in a pop lyric. It seemed pointless to copy old world rock and roll language, and attitudes, when I'd just spent a semester studying Doris

Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*. But, at the same time, Grant and I were up for matching high-brow with low-brow—our genuine affection for the music and joy of the Monkees an example. The trick was not to get caught in the middle.

**MM:** As a songwriter with English degrees, I know, for sure, that I would comb literary references into my own songs. Can you direct me to any specific instances or lines in your songs where you feel you were consciously or subconsciously channeling moments from your library? This doesn’t have to be limited to poetry by the way (I recall the reconstructed James Joyce-with-guitar pose of the *Danger In The Past* cover).

**RF:** Generally, I try and let my admiration for certain writers or books act as an inspiration to my work, flowing into it, without quoting the work or drawing attention to it. When I do reference work from the literary world it tends, to my ear or view, to be quite obscure. For example, in “Head Full Of Steam,” there is the lyric—“Her mother works, her father works, in exports but that’s of no importance at all.” In a favorite novel of mine, Christopher Isherwood’s *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, the central character runs a business from his apartment, with the words “Exports and Imports” on the door—this, I remember, inspired the line. But as you can see, it is very obscure.

**MM:** As suggested earlier, the Go-Betweens were part of a generation of unusually literate musicians who saw no dissonance between popular music and explicitly “high-brow” cultural signifiers—lots of *Marxism Today* and “Yves Marie-Sainte in *On The Waterfront*,” for example—how aware of all this were you at the time? And what other examples of this phenomenon can you think of which, in turn, might have influenced you?

**RF:** I do think this is a generational phenomenon and it goes back to what I was saying at the start: punk and post-punk was a window that let in a lot of interesting people that normally would not have bothered being in rock bands. Photographers, actors, artists, and graphic designers, jumped into bands because virtuosity on a musical instrument, which had ruled rock music since the mid-1960s, was not of prime importance; it had been replaced by Do You Have Anything To Say? Lloyd Cole crept through. As did Morrissey, Nick Cave, Lydia Lunch, Howard Devoto, Poly Styrene, Ian Curtis, and many more. The window closed, but not entirely. A new lyrical thread, inspired by literature, high-brow and low-brow, had infiltrated the possibilities of the rock lyric.

With Armitage’s, Forster’s remarks underscore the intricate interdisciplinary dialectic that was taking place at the time and which offered to each of them a cultural resource. They certainly reflect my own motivations when forming the band Innocents Abroad with college friends back in 1984. Clearly, groups like the Go-Betweens and the Triffids belonged to a generation of Australian bands notable, as Forster points out, for their incorporation of “things outside of rock culture.” Tellingly, within the context of this discussion, John Kinsella observes of the Triffids’ frontman: “As a lyricist, McComb wrote musical metaphors with a strong sense of the literary poetic. His eclectic reading

is evident throughout his poetry, consciously mixing not only ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural registers, but also contemporary and anachronistic forms of expression.”<sup>16</sup> It’s the word “consciously” here that links songwriters of the period to many of the poets they subsequently helped “grow” from within their fanbase: a phenomenon entirely mutual with Armitage’s notion of an extended franchise. Sure enough, this idea found its way into song as well as poetry, and sometimes into both disciplines by the same writer. Kinsella, for instance, goes on to advance his claims for McComb’s poetry as much as his songwriting: “It is almost bizarre that David McComb is not yet known as a significant Australian poet. One of the features that should place him in the company of his contemporaries, whether journal or book-published or performing, is his innovative use of form.”<sup>17</sup> This may be stretching things a little, given McComb’s premature demise and the vagaries of literary reception, but it is interesting that “a significant Australian poet” is claiming some sort of generational and interdisciplinary kinship; that the franchise is, indeed, extended in a way similar to the Nobel Committee’s culturally omnivorous, genre-blurring selection of Bob Dylan. And sure enough, when I turn on my second-favorite song of all time, I encounter McComb’s beautiful gloss (first excerpt) on a well-known early poem by Les Murray (second excerpt):

I’ve got a little place to myself up on Stony Ridge  
 I’ve got it made in the shade  
 I sleep in the afternoon  
 Leave my bed unmade<sup>18</sup>

I’ll get up soon, and leave my bed unmade.  
 I’ll go outside and split off kindling wood,  
 From the yellow-box log that lies beside the gate,  
 And the sun will be high, for I get up late now.<sup>19</sup>

Of this very track, the poet Matt Merritt recently confided to me: “That one song played a huge part in me getting into poetry in the first place—I loved it and the album so much that as soon as I read McComb saying that it had been inspired by the Les Murray poem, I wanted to read everything Murray had written.”<sup>20</sup> Whichever way we cut it, what we’re witnessing are compositional methods surely analogous to Armitage’s use of song material as stimulus for his own poems, from which direct elements are gradually “leached away” during the writing process. There are of course major departures, in structure and sentiment alike, in McComb’s rendition: the willful use of cliché and straight rhyme; the shift in mood from melancholy to contentment; the exchange, by way of verb tense, of the future with the present moment. Metatextually, however, the instance may operate as a kind of mutual lifeline: a tip of the cap on McComb’s part back to Murray, whose poetry a listener may now wish to pursue or revisit, and a potential, demonstrated credit for the songwriter as a reader of poetry.

It’s a phenomenon with which I am, myself, familiar. Musically, I’ve recycled my own past reading into subsequent songs, glossing on a 1995 album, for example, the phrase “Though much is taken, much abides” from Tennyson’s “Ulysses” in “Holiday Golightly”

(a title itself gleaned from Truman Capote’s 1958 novella *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*) and, on a different track from the same album, lines from *Macbeth*.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, when it comes to poetry, I’ve parlayed my years as a sound engineer into poems like “Haas Effect” and “Mic-ing the Kit”<sup>22</sup>; described, in “Waiting for the *Green World Tour* to come to town,” the socio-emotional effect of REM fandom; and engaged directly, as in the Smiths-derived “Bigmouth Strikes Again,” with post-punk lyrics. The latter example reads as follows:

I’m afraid I’m an open book, I say stuff,  
 confess too readily in my cups and  
  
 mess-up in moments like these: you  
 with your roman nose held high in disgust  
  
 at my latest *faux pas*. And, sweetness,  
 I know you are only half-joking when  
  
 you say I should be bludgeoned in my bed  
 for selling my Smiths ticket so I could  
  
 go see The Armoury Show instead  
 but, at the time, you were only four  
  
 and, having seen them twice before—  
 like a Beckett play—I felt I’d got the point.  
  
 Besides, liking Jobson longer, there was  
 a seniority of quiff thing to be respected.  
  
 Connected was my love for McGeogh’s guitar  
 which I felt would fade out before Marr’s.  
  
 So, don’t give me back those mix tapes, don’t melt  
 down my old Walkman; consider them my  
  
 legacy to this retro age of legacy,  
 alongside these inconvenient truths,  
  
 my scratched vinyl, your Spotify.com.  
 Because here in old Camden Town,  
  
 out drinking with the hung-on-too-long  
 I sense that I’ve moved on. Lover, please  
  
 stop me if you think you’ve heard this one before  
 and don’t make me know how Joan of Arc felt.<sup>23</sup>

Here, the song references are not so much “leached away” as flagrantly interjected—a set of *heteroglossic* utterances through which popular music arrives, as a welcomed “other,” into the literary context. The poem’s fabric of Smith’s allusions invokes, I hope, a broader sense of past-shared culture—a potpourri of media, practices, and proper

names, including, beneath Morrissey's domineering shadow, a sub-strata of the half-forgotten as signified by bands like the Armoury Show. The invoked cultural capital can be seen as an (ongoing) means of negotiating a personal relationship (the poem's "I" and "you"), and performs, like the Murray/McComb pairing above, a mutually constituting function: the invocation and transformation of the Smiths/Morrissey as a meaningful and generationally formative entity, and the interpolation of myself as part of its network—a certain ethos, I suppose, as listener/fan/fellow-songster. And this use of allusion—of textual sign-posting—extends by way of Beckett to Morrissey's own, well-documented reliance on literature. Broadly speaking, then, one can find across the spectrum of the New Gen era poets "And the rest of their generation" (to quote Lloyd Cole)<sup>24</sup> not only a shared musical influence but also a mutual effort, by importing playlists into poetics, to shake up high/low distinctions.

Returning to Greenlaw, whose book *The Importance of Music to Girls* heads this discussion, one finds an interesting deviation from my thesis: despite the revelations of her memoir, direct invocations of music are, in her poetry, hard to find. Declining to be interviewed for this chapter, she offered the view that: "Your questions are good ones, but I've found over the years that the book is the best expression of what I have to say about this."<sup>25</sup> Such understandable reticence does not, however, extend to her 2001 debut novel, *Mary George of Allnorthover*, a *bildungsroman* fizzing with a sense of youthful epiphany, attendant upon her teenage protagonist's exposure to the culturally energizing effect of punk rock:

They came in from the coast and even from London, drawn by the excitement of a kind of music that had already made its way out of the city and was bubbling up through bedrooms and garages out in the sticks. For the first time, urban boys and girls wished themselves provincial, hopelessly cut off and with an easily shockable audience on hand.<sup>26</sup>

Evoked wonderfully here is that juncture when punk broke out of the metropolitan centers of London and New York to send its wave of cultural possibility and self-authorization crashing over their provincial hinterlands, thereby paving the way for what was to become the less-centralized phenomenon of post-punk. It certainly *feels* akin to Simon Armitage's description of the permission he saw granted by punk and post-punk to stake a claim in the margins. Indeed, Greenlaw depicts the precise moment when those margins became the basis of a new mainstream culture authored by the very youngsters here described. Thus, by the 1990s, *Nine Modern Poets*, *Poets of Our Times*, and the "O"-level qualification they facilitated had been supplanted by the new GCSE (General Certificate of Education) qualification and anthologies which featured for the first time a younger generation of punk, post-punk, and dub-influenced poets like Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, and Benjamin Zephaniah. This was—in many respects—the new order.

Such evolution as I'm describing here was, clearly, a graduated one. The practitioners under scrutiny came up with highly personalized responses to the acculturative possibilities offered by the times. But many approached their core practice in the

same intellectually curious spirit of inter-disciplinarity liberated by post-punk. Thus, songwriters were influenced by their reading of literature and authors were, likewise, influenced by their listening. The same could be said of the film and the visual arts, and, as I’ve already suggested, of other eras. However, there remains a certain *something* afloat here, beyond what I can adequately cover in this chapter. As Simon Reynolds observes in the introduction to his seminal book, *Rip It Up and Start Again*: “Those postpunk years from 1978-1984 saw the systematic ransacking of twentieth-century modernist art and literature. The entire postpunk period looks like an attempt to replay virtually every modernist theme and technique via the medium of pop music.”<sup>27</sup> So, it’s hardly surprising that music makers of this period modeled and inspired similar levels of reciprocal inquiry among their fans. It is this very quality of interconnectedness generated by an aspirational music culture which was, in turn, reflected by its fans in their own artistic output.

As we’ve seen, many of the artists even switched practice, at some point, to attempt satisfactory answers in secondary artforms. I’ve already touched upon Armitage’s forays into indie and ambient music, as well as David McComb’s more discreet venture into “serious” poetry. This phenomenon might be dismissed as dilettantism were it not for the avowed quality of the results. Virginia Astley is a case in point. To readers of a certain vintage, her eminence in the “pastoral pop” rack of the independent music store of the 1980s might yet be remembered. I first encountered her in 1981 as a headline member of the Ravishing Beauties, who were supporting the Teardrop Explodes in their residency at Liverpool’s legendary Club Zoo. I recall her winsomely groomed image staring back at me from the vinyl collection of many a good friend, and recollect her work as the hippest *collaboratrice du jour* with a string of cool post-punk acts, including my own teenage favorites, the Skids, on their ill-fated Stuart-free album, *Joy*. Lately, she has reinvented herself as a talented poet, publishing a couple of collections, the latest of which—2018’s *The English River*—I reviewed for *Poetry Ireland*. In that review, I set her work within the canonical context of Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, Alice Oswald, et al., and rejoice in how she “takes us on a meditative journey down this most iconic of rivers and, in doing so, evokes a landscape already highly scrutinised and freighted with cultural resonance.” I remark too on how “the poet’s musical past creeps in with references like “The white noise flanged / and phased.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, a poem such as “How did I ever think this would be OK?” is freighted with lyrical signifiers that sing to readers familiar with the music and personalities of the post-punk era:

this winter’s afternoon they married  
 in that same riverside church, your sister  
 pale and gorgeous, Russell in his kilt.  
 His mothers and sisters are here,  
 downing rum punch in the lounge.  
 They seem to avoid me, possibly  
 because I was the one who slung  
 his bass guitar into the Thames.  
 That was before you and I were,

before London and Liverpool,  
 before Oxford and Monmouthshire.  
 But the last time I was in this house—  
 I can hardly speak—the last time,  
 was the day we buried you.  
 And I remember your father,  
 Who had never bought your CDs,  
 Breaking down in Tower Records.  
 And that day, your poor body,  
 the only thing the same your hands.<sup>29</sup>

As a fan of the musical era here depicted, I almost feel as if the characters in this otherwise-personal elegy were culled from my very own past. It still feels like an intrusion into private grief to reflect that, unless I'm very much mistaken, "Russell" is here the former Skids bass player, Russell Webb, and the poem's addressee, Pete de Freitas, the drummer for Echo & The Bunnymen, killed in a motorcycle accident in June 1989. Astley is merely adhering to the maxim, "write what you know," but what she knows happens to be the post-punk world of which she was once part. I started off by stating a wish to examine those poetic moments which were most clearly the product of acquired punk or post-punk sensibilities and vernacular, and it strikes me that this poem is paradigmatic. Even the places mentioned are locations notable for the studios where many bands of that era recorded: Eden and Trident Studios in London, Amazon in Liverpool, The Manor, just north of Oxford, and Rockfield in Monmouthshire. The resonant context, vital to all successful verse, is here unmistakably specific to the post-punk narrative, just as Wessex might be to a Hardy poem.

As Forster suggested, we are witnessing something of "a generational phenomenon" based upon the widely held feeling that punk and post-punk did, indeed, provide an opportunity to participate in popular music for a range of previously marginalized outsiders from other disciplines. Its mixing-up of "low-" and "high-brow" artforms was not unique to this generation *per se*. However, it was precisely those emblematic notions of "extended franchise," the "open window," and cultural permission, which characterized the era, allowing in Forster's "Photographers, actors, artists, graphic designers" and, as I hope I've adequately demonstrated, nascent poets. Let's not forget, too, that "post-punk" was altogether more protean and multi-layered than being just about "art": the 1980s ska-revival stood, after all, on a ticket of "fuck art let's dance," though this is, in itself, a cultural statement.

In summing up, then, and keenly aware of my many sins of omission, I'll emphasize the expansiveness of the terrain whose surface I've merely scratched: I've not even mentioned the punk poets, themselves, nor the dub poetry of someone like Linton Kwesi Johnson, nor, indeed the crude poetics of John Lydon or the meta-kitsch of bands like the Ramones—all examples of extended poetic franchise beyond those artists discussed here. As for poetry itself, in the final analysis, it is an ever-evolving language machine, constantly rebooting to encompass new registers and speech patterns from the times in which it is written. We are currently witnessing, for example, the linguistic

adjustment poetry is making to reflect new social sensitivities and digital leisure-time pursuits, as can be seen in Irish poet Stephen Sexton’s award-winning debut collection, *If All the World and Love Were Young*, a text dominated by the signifiers of his 16-bit video-game childhood. But this is not my generational reality, nor do I negotiate it with quite the same urgency. What I hope I *have* shown is the cultural heft and seriousness with which punk and post-punk engaged those of its audience members who went on to produce art of their own in the form of poetry, and who enjoyed its hand-in-glove relationship with notions that popular music *was* art, and that art could be made popular under its influence.

## Notes

- 1 Lavinia Greenlaw, *The Importance of Music to Girls* (London: Faber, 2007), 123.
- 2 Simon Armitage, *Gig: The Life and Times of a Rock-star Fantasist* (London: Penguin, 2009), 3.
- 3 Christopher James, “Hand in Glove,” *Poetry News*, Summer 2012.
- 4 Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun, and Mark Fisher, eds., *Post-Punk Then and Now* (London: Repeater, 2016), 7.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 8–9.
- 6 Radcliffe and Maconie, *BBC Radio*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p049fr52>.
- 7 Theodore Adorno, “Music and Mass Culture,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (London: University of California Press, 2002), 456.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 458.
- 9 Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand In The Trench Achilles!* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39. Vandiver ascribes the phrase to Richard Jenkyns, “The Beginnings of Greats, 1800–1872, I: Classical Studies,” in *The History of the University of Oxford, VI: Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 1*, ed. M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 519.
- 10 Armitage, “Don’t Sing (for Paddy McAloon),” *Zoom!* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1989), 19.
- 11 Armitage, “To the Bridge,” in *Seeing Stars* (London: Faber, 2010), 45.
- 12 John Kinsella, introduction to *Beautiful Waste*, David McComb (Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle, 2009), 13.
- 13 Robert Forster, *Grant & I: Inside and Outside the Go-Betweens* (Sydney: Penguin, 2016), 21–2.
- 14 *Ibid.*, “Grand and I—Robert Forster on Literature,” *Penguin Books Australia*, September 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TL07zPHq2Ug>.
- 15 Andrew Stafford, *Pig City: From the Saints to Savage Garden* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2004).
- 16 Kinsella, *Beautiful Waste*, 11.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 18 “New Year’s Greetings (The Country Widower),” track 8 on the Triffids, *The Black Swan*, Island, 1989.

- 19 Les Murray, "The Widower in the Country," in *The Ilex Tree* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1965), 30.
- 20 Matt Merrit, email message to author, December 18, 2019.
- 21 "Holiday Golightly" and "The Land That Time Forgot," on Eskimø Chains, *Nureyev*, Southpaw, 1995.
- 22 Martin Malone, *The Waiting Hillside* (Matlock: Templar Poetry, 2011), 27–9.
- 23 Martin Malone, "Bigmouth Strikes Again," in *Cur* (Nottingham: Shoestring Poetry, 2015), 44–5.
- 24 "Are You Ready To Be Heartbroken?," track 10 on Lloyd Cole and the Commotions, *Rattlesnakes*, Polydor, 1984.
- 25 Lavinia Greenlaw, email message to author, February 19, 2019.
- 26 *Ibid.*, *Mary George of Allnorthover* (London: Flamingo, 2001), 270.
- 27 Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984* (London: Penguin, 2006), 2.
- 28 Virginia Astley, "The Weir at Benson," in *The English River* (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2018), 51.
- 29 *Ibid.*, "How Did I Ever Think This Would Be OK?" in *The English River* (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2018), 51.