

Netscope — limits and possibilities of the Internet for popular music studies

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It was Christmas 1980 when Gerard Kempers, David Horn and I stood in a Lancaster fish and chip shop discussing whether an international association for the study of popular music was a good idea and, if it was, whether the foundation of such an organisation might be a possible outcome of the first international conference for popular music studies that we were trying to organise at that time. Nearly a generation has passed since then and IASPM is about to hold its ninth biennial conference in Japan. Many things have changed about the organisation since those early days, but one solid reason for the association's existence has remained: the need for coordination of information and resources in a field of inquiry that is by its very nature not only interdisciplinary but also international and interprofessional. In those early days of IASPM we argued that if the production and dissemination of popular music relies on cooperation between musicians, managers, broadcasters, journalists, etc. across the world, then serious studies of the phenomenon should not be hampered by rivalry or mistrust between musicians and non-musicians, between those working in the public and private sectors, between colleagues from different nations and definitely not between the territorial ambitions of individuals in different university departments or faculties.

One of the driving forces behind the development of popular music research resources in the early eighties was Paul Oliver, another was David Horn. At the second IASPM conference (Reggio Emilia, 1983), long before anyone talked about webs and nets, David Horn (1983: 508-517) sketched the kinds of archival activity which IASPM activists could contribute to, concentrating on (i) the provision of bibliographic and discographical information; (ii) archives, particularly interviews, live recordings and visual footage. One substantial outcome of this work is the production of EPMOW¹ whose bibliography is currently in press. This encyclopaedia appears at a crucial time in the development of resources for our area of studies, for behind its construction lies a taxonomy of headwords and categories that may be of use in trying to manage the chaotic multitude of popular-music-related information 'out there' on the Internet. Moreover, although being published only as hard copy, the encyclopedia can, and may well eventually, be published on CD-ROM. Perhaps it may even exist in some online form at a later date. Whether or not EPMOW will ever be available online ultimately depends on (i) what happens to intellectual property rights on the net, i.e. who in fact owns and controls what we produce when our words or music appear online; (ii) who owns the software used to access information on the net and to format information for the net, i.e. how much will have to pay for the privilege of storing or accessing anything at all; (iii) who owns and controls the Internet's hardware infrastructure, i.e. all those cables, servers, transmitters, terrestrial links, satellites, all that satellite launching

1. Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, the first volumes of which are shortly to be published by Cassell, London.

and repair paraphernalia, and how much we will be charged for using those too. These three unresolved points are crucial to any serious discussion of future uses of the net and I shall return to them later on in this paper.

In order to simplify the task of discussing the needs of popular music studies in relation to the Internet, I found it useful to list types of web site, both existing and potential, in two, partially overlapping, main categories of knowledge: the 'musical' and the 'metamusical'. These main categories are then further subdivided into categories according to such various criteria as who provides what for whom and for what purpose. The whole taxonomy of categories is shown as table 1.

Table 1. Categories of existing and potential websites relevant to the study of popular music

1 Musical information

- 1.1 Actual 'works': (i) sound; (ii) sound & vision; (iii) notation.
- 1.2 Real time musical production with other users.
- 1.3 Constructional tools: (i) software (e.g. MIDI and/or digital recording/editing; video postproduction software); (ii) sound treatment algorithms (e.g. reverb patches, equalisation and filter settings, phasing, chorus); (iii) sound samples.
- 1.4 Interactive educational programmes: (i) composition and arrangement; (ii) aural training (e.g. chord recognition, sound treatment recognition); (iii) MIDI instrument performance; (iv) notational skills.
- 1.5 Analysis materials: (i) IOCM bank; (ii) HS bank.²

2 Metamusical information

- 2.1 Actual texts: articles, books, journals, newsletters, music policy documents, etc.
- 2.2 Intercommunication: (i) real time 'chat lines'; (ii) e-mail; (iii) bulletin boards (e.g. IASPM list).
- 2.3 Searchable databases: (i) discographies; (ii) bibliographies; (iii) filmographies (including videographies); (iv) music business directories.
- 2.4 Education and research institutions: (i) course descriptions; (ii) conditions of entry; (iii) outcomes; (iv) research descriptions.
- 2.5 Fan information: (i) by genre; (ii) by artist (including biographies, discographies).
- 2.6 Independent industry data: (i) reliable sales figures; (ii) music media broadcast data; (iii) publishing and performing rights figures; (iv) music law information.
- 2.7 Local music activity information: (i) events; (ii) venues; (iii) local popular music profile; (iv) local directory of music business, education, etc.
- 2.8 Music industry sites
 - 2.8.1 Record and publishing company marketing information: (i) artists on roster; (ii) new releases; (iii) current tour dates; (iv) company history and policy.
 - 2.8.2 Production, distribution and retail information: (i) broadcast and other related media company information; (ii) charts; (iii) available 'product'; (iv) in-house sales figures
 - 2.8.3 Ancillary industry information, e.g. lighting, merchandising, video and film

2. Try <http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/muwi/forum/musem.htm> or its mailing list <http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/muwi/forum/listen/musem.htm> for banks of musematic comparison.

production, CD-pressing plants, music computer expertise.

- 2.8.4 Specialist recorded music provider information, e.g. library music producers, providers of specialised background music for shops, offices, supermarkets, transport, etc.

Even if this short overview of existing and potential types of popular music website is probably far from exhaustive, there can be no doubt that the amount and extent of useful information available to all of us here, though not to the vast majority of the world's population (another point to return to) is quite staggering: as far as we are concerned, the web brings amazing advantages and I can tell students doing projects for which I very much doubt there to be any available hard copy sources to get on the web and do some searches. Still, however many superlatives may come from addicted surfers, this relatively new technology also makes life more complicated.

The first and most obvious problems with all this information, viewed from the standpoint of popular music studies, are those of overview and of search engine inconsistency. Different search engines are notorious for coming up with different hits, such discrepancies obliging users wanting to find reliable information to waste time running the same search on several engines. Lack of overview is a more complex problem.

As can be gathered from table 1, existing or potential websites relating to our area of studies are extremely diverse in terms of (i) information format;³ (ii) type of information offered; (iii) purpose of information; (iv) presumptive user groups. Now, although IASPM was originally set up as an interdisciplinary, international and interprofessional organisation, the association is at the moment a partially interdisciplinary and partially international collection of mainly academics. I mean that most IASPM activists come from some branch of cultural studies or social sciences, relatively few from departments of music or business; I mean that what were once termed the 'developing nations' are under-represented in IASPM; and I mean that IASPM includes very few members of the music industry, in the broadest sense of the term, in the sense that there are very few musicians, singers, composers, recording engineers, music software designers, managers, distributors, broadcasters, etc. in the association. In discussing the potential of the Internet for popular music studies, we definitely need to consider whether we should follow the original intentions of the association, just mentioned, or merely serve the immediate interests of IASPM membership as it currently stands.

Assuming, as scholars of popular music, that our notion of knowledge embraces creative skills and modes of nonverbal communication, not just the verbliness and numeracy that traditional academe still seems to put at the top of its symbolic system charts, I would therefore recommend that strategies for developing facilities on the Net should indeed follow the interdisciplinary, international and interprofessional intentions of the original IASPM statutes.

With these few preliminaries in mind, I will now go on to discuss what measures IASPM members might take in making relevant parts of the Internet more transparent, more easily accessible and more useful to the broad range of interests and activities that I think IASPM membership should ideally reflect.

3. Everything from video quick files, MIDI and digital sound files to image bits and straight text.

IASPM web officer

I would like to suggest that IASPM set up some sort of Internet Committee whose members should reflect the association's commitment to interdisciplinarity, internationalism and interprofessionalism. This committee should find ways of employing a full-time web officer⁴ whose initial tasks should be

- 1 to monitor all popular music 'metasites';
- 2 to monitor all main search engines and their coverage of popular music related terms, concepts and names.

The first of these two tasks is relatively straightforward and would produce a constantly updated 'super-metasite' enabling users to browse topics according to the relatively incongruent taxonomies of information provided at those other meta-sites. This initial measure would act as a stop-gap while the second task just mentioned was being developed.

This second task might seem to be quite daunting. It probably is too, but the taxonomy created for EPMOW provides a useful starting point and, especially if the encyclopedia were ever to go online, would enable users from a wide variety of professions, nations and disciplines to access information quite efficiently. The basic headword taxonomy for EPMOW runs roughly as follows:

- 1 Musical structures, music theory
- 2 Music industry, business and technology
- 3 Genres
- 4 Proper names:
 - (a) Locations (nations, regions, cities, etc.)
 - (b) Persons (artists, composers, managers, etc.)
- 5 Sociocultural categories

If the IASPM web officer and his/her committee were able to monitor popular music metasites and major search engines for recurrent popular music studies search terms on a regular basis, a sophisticated framework of hypertext pointers could be constructed which could save enormous amounts of user time by filtering out the listing and sluggish downloading of all the irrelevant pages that engines like Alta Vista or Yahoo tend to bring with them.

Another important priority for the IASPM web officer would be to negotiate the on-line publication of EPMOW, which could never have been produced without the existence of our association, and to hypertext edit the data in the encyclopedia.

Ownership, control, profitability and democracy

I would like to think that the proposal to set up a IASPM web committee and web officer, however tenuous, inadequate or impractical you may find it, constitutes one constructive direction that IASPM might take in improving facilities on the Net for popular music studies. Nevertheless, even if such measures could be implemented, there are other, far greater, obstacles to overcome, obstacles concerning matters of ownership, control, profitability and democracy. The first area I would like to devote a little attention to concerns artistic and intellectual property (already dealt with); the second deals with matters of macro-economic power and pol-

4. Webmaster' - suggestions for gender PC term

itics. I'll start with just a little of the latter to set the scene for the former.

Copyright

With the fall of most socialist nation states, the ruling classes of the political economy under which we all now live have no reason to provide a 'human face' any longer because they think they have no more serious geopolitical competition to contend with. We're all subjected to the anomaly of having to apply the rules of capitalist business to areas of human activity where the short-term quantification of success and where the unidimensional and numerical assessment of 'achievement' all miss the social use of what we do or create. (This contradiction was admirably exemplified by Terri Janke in her paper yesterday about the blatant clash of values and interests between on the one hand Indigenous populations and their music, and, on the other, the bourgeois individualistic underpinnings of western copyright legislation). The long and short of this process seems to me to be that exchange value, and its characteristics of short-term monetary quantification, has replaced use value and its character of long-term social qualification, almost to the extent of excluding the latter as a permissible basis for assessing and remunerating any form of labour. For those of us working in academe, monetarisation has meant that we are increasingly required to charge per itemisable service we offer, as though we were selling bus tickets or producing soap. Not only are we likely to have to start charging students per module or contact hour; we will also have to start charging for materials we produce, or, at least, for use of those materials. Such monetary mania flies in the face of whatever has made the Internet so useful thus far: its ability to offer a wide range of information and facilities virtually free of charge, at least to us 2% of the world's population who live in the industrialised nations and who either belong to a university that has yet to go bust or who can afford to be online and to pay a monthly subscription to a commercial server.

The contradiction between, on the one hand, the relatively democratic and open nature of the Internet as we know it so far, and, on the other, notions of intellectual and artistic property formalised into legal practice in post mortem reaction to the technological and social realities of yesteryear may have serious repercussions on popular music studies. Proposed copyright legislation on the Internet will, if I interpret Ian Macdonald's yesterday afternoon paper correctly, seek to apply existing and notions of ownership to a medium or forum in which intellectual and artistic property are either extremely difficult concepts to define or fast becoming irrelevant to those of us who would like others to hear the music we make or to read the words we write, and who would like to disseminate those thoughts, musical, visual or verbal, to as many people as possible as cheaply as possible; i.e. to those of us -- and we ARE the majority! -- whose experience of publishers, record companies, rights collections societies etc., etc., has been anything but beneficial to our work or to our personal finances. Let me mention a few examples of the problems involved.

Many 'actual works' (1.1) are currently and, many 'actual texts' (2.1) will, I suppose sooner rather than later, be subject to copyright on the Internet, so that when a user downloads a copyrighted music or text file, a charge will be debited to that user's credit card or bank account. Speaking with my musician's hat on, I think it is quite right that I be paid if someone steals my labour and either misuses it (breach of moral rights) or knowingly feigns authorship of what I have produced. However, from the viewpoint of music educator with little or no chance of deriving

any financial benefit from quoting, analysing or transcribing a musical work under copyright, I think it is totally absurd that I be asked to pay to carry out my contractual duty to increase my own and my students' understanding of how existing musical works are actually constructed (their musical materials) and of what these works are likely to communicate in given social circumstances. This scholarly and educational activity presupposes that I have to have access to the musical work in question, as a whole and, if I am to carry out any detailed analysis, as discretised soundbytes.

As things currently stand I cannot publish a proper musicological analysis containing the full transcription of any work without obtaining permission from the owners of that work's publishing rights. And if you think that's fair, try this: I can be refused the right to quote mere snippets of music if the publishing rights owners see fit. Such copyright fetishism can sometimes become quite absurd. Alec Wilder, for instance, was denied permission to quote a single note of any of Irving Berlin's songs in his book about the great US songwriters of the interwar years, while Sheila Whiteley had to pay Alan Klein, whose Abco controls rights on Rolling Stones Songs, 70 pounds for each occurrence of 'I've tried' (as in 'I've tried and I've tried and I've tried' from Satisfaction), i.e. 450 ASD for four seconds' worth of lyrics only. Sheila did not take the joke too well because she had to fork out the 210 pounds herself: Routledge (or whoever it was) took no responsibility and academics are increasingly obliged to carry the can for copyright clearance on their work.

Unfortunately, copyright control mania has more far-reaching repercussions on the development of popular music studies. Let me explain. In his paper yesterday morning, Philip Hayward spoke eloquently for greater involvement in IASPM from musicians and musicologists, a cause I have tried to champion for many years now. One obvious reason for the dearth of music-immanent studies of popular music is, as Hayward rightly pointed out, the dogged conservatism and, I would say, suicidal elitism of many traditional departments of musicology. Another reason is that it is virtually impossible to publish musicological texts about popular music because it is almost inevitably under copyright. As I have already intimated, if you aren't denied permission to quote (as notation or stored sound), you'll have to pay through the nose. On top of this, the often futile chase for permission to quote assumes that you have the time to find out who owns the publishing rights for whatever you want to quote, a wild goose chase which often ends up by discovering that the publishing company no longer exists. If IASPM is serious about its intention to include MUSIC in popular music studies, then the contradiction of the individual musician's right to remuneration versus the individual's right to understand the conditions of musical structuration and communication HAVE to be solved. My final point in this section is that if copyright control mania is to be extended to the Internet, then the position of musicology in popular music studies is even more severely exacerbated.

Personally I agree with the Grateful Dead with the proviso that if copyright as we know it is not already dead, then it ought to be soon. Alternative forms of remuneration need to be worked in the age of digital technology. I think we need to think in radical terms of music's use value, i.e. in terms of democratically controlled social contracts. Obviously, this is far too big an issue to pursue here and I take the liberty of leaving that road totally unmetalled in the middle of nowhere, like the Hervey Developmental Highway in the outback west of Townsville...

Power and politics

Finally I think that IASPM needs to consider the more macropolitical issues of the Internet. I am referring here to ownership and control over two things: (i) the material base on which the net depends and (ii) the software allowing us to navigate our way round the net.

I don't think we can take it for granted that the major media conglomerates, Bill Gates or any of his cronies or competitors are happy to see the money-making opportunities that the Internet could provide them with just pass them by. To be realistic, you only need think of electronics companies that build satellites, or of oil corporations that produce rocket fuel, or of telecommunications giants that manufacture and service broadband phone lines, or of media conglomerates and their control of artistic and intellectual 'property': none of these have a reputation for an altruistic or democratic attitude towards the diffusion of knowledge or culture (except for the rare occasions when such diffusion happens to concur with their overriding profit motives). That is why we also need to be active in planning alternative — democratic — ways of covering the considerable costs that public access to information on the Internet actually entails. We also need to support the establishment of non-commercial search engines which allow web users to access information without the encumbrance of advertising and without the surfeit of sales sites that dominate screen displays of search engine 'hits'.

I am fully aware that these two suggestions go way beyond the remit of IASPM, but I do not think that it would be in our interests not to propagate for such solutions. It would be even more naïve to believe that the relatively open anarchy of the Internet, as we know it now, can go on for ever.