

Review

Philip Tagg. 'Scotch Snaps: The Big Picture'. Online video documentary located at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BQAD5uZsLY> and also <http://tagg.org/ptavmat.htm> (1 hour 15 mins)

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Popular music scholars, largely dealing with unnotated music, are familiar with the problem of rendering our subject in words on a page. The arrival of online video—a medium which incorporates moving image and sound as well as print—has vastly increased our ability to present arguments about popular music, as regular conferences of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) eloquently testify. Yet there is relatively little exploitation of these possibilities in what are recognized as 'academic publications', and this is reflected in the usual review repertoire of our leading academic journals in the field. Oddly, then, this review is a departure from usual practice, since it brings attention not to a hard copy publication, but to a documentary posted on YouTube.

Those of us fortunate to have enjoyed Philip Tagg's keynote at the 13th Biennial IASPM Conference in Rome in 2005 are well aware of his command of multimedia resources. He deploys them here in a carefully wrought production that ranges across engaging home and concert video illustrations, abundant contemporary and archival music and explanatory graphics. The medium also enables the written text to be presented sonically, so that we are able to move beyond the distraction of denotation to the acoustic properties of language. This is essential in dealing with the subject of his presentation, which could hardly be more basic. A general introduction to language rhythms brings us to the 'Scotch snap': a two-beat rhythmic effect that is to be found in words such as 'brother', 'mother', 'ever', 'rhythm' and 'never'. It is ubiquitous in particular kinds of music, including that which is associated with both white and black people, and therefore raises the question 'Why *Scotch*?' This is the kind of question that underpins what is, for me, the most interesting type of research: it interrogates something so deeply lodged in our consciousness and language that to question it seems ridiculous.

This video opens a door to a far-reaching cultural history. Tagg explores the specific linguistic traditions in which the snap is commonly found, with reference to its sources and dissemination. The enquiry leads to the class foundations of music forms and how these, in turn, relate to cultural and national histories. It exposes the tenuousness of essentialist ethnic music classifications that drive a wedge between white and black music. This binary underpins and distorts the dominant public narratives of popular music history. Yet, instead of thinking of Dvořák's confusion of black and white American vernacular music as quaintly uninformed, Tagg accords it respect, and asks 'why?' Fundamentally, he asks 'what accounts for the very distinctive cross-ethnic distribution of this two-note rhythmic pattern in music?' The enquiry takes us beyond musicology, into New Cultural History, socio-economic history, micro- and macro-history, and colonial history (which also provides lessons for popular music and cultural researchers in the Australian region). It feeds into (popular) music history, American music, music diasporas and musical syncretism, and has major implications for broader cultural history. The search for the Scotch snap provides a model of both synchronic and diachronic cultural analysis and their convergences.

Tagg's presentation is lucid and engaging, but without dumbing down the content. Erudition is delivered clearly and without condescension. You don't need to be a musicologist to understand this video and the inclusion of graphics means viewers can comprehend Tagg's points even if they can't read music. If you want to consult his sources, then these are found on his website (<http://www.tagg.org/Clips/ScotchSnap/SnapCredits.htm>). If you want to take issue with anything, the great advantage of the medium is that you can take it up with the author who is able to edit the document (as he did following one of our email conversations). Apart from such details, the overall argument provides a platform for extensive further research. For this reviewer, it reactivated questions of the relationship between music and oratory, between musical and poetic rhythms, and the opening up of historical disjunctions between them. Most importantly, however, the historical analysis of this simple two-beat rhythm challenges some of the most durable essentialisms that sustain so much popular music discourse. Apart from anything else, it is a wonderful teaching resource—and it is free.