[*PMH* 6.3 (2011) 349-352]
doi:10.1558/pomh.v6i3.349

Popular Music History (print) ISSN 1740-7133
Popular Music History (online) ISSN 1743-1646

Review

Sean Campbell and Colin Coulter. *Why Pamper Life's Complexities?: Essays on The Smiths*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-7190-7841-5. £65.00 (hbk). £15.99 (pbk).

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Keywords: academic; class; Conservative; influences; Morrissey; radical; Smiths

Several of these fourteen engaging essays began as papers at Manchester Metropolitan University's 2005 conference on The Smiths, also titled *Why Pamper Life's Complexities?* However, published half a decade later, at the time of the emergence of a British government for which no one voted, the book impressively bears a historiographical and indeed ideological edge that was less pronounced at the conference. Almost every chapter constructively considers The Smiths' anti-Conservative perspective and how this marked their work during Thatcher's second term, which coincided with the band's recording career.

'Ambivalences that run through the songs of The Smiths reveal a band that are rather more complex than their many detractors seem willing or even able to recognise' (172), states co-editor Colin Coulter's chapter. This stance is shared in each essay. The editors' Introduction questions the ways in which, by the twenty-first century, less than two decades after they split, The Smiths' numerous radical pronouncements were being obscured in popular, retrospective narratives of the band's career. Considerable attention is also given to one of the weirdest instances cited by the aforementioned detractors, Conservative leader David Cameron's well-publicized proclamations of fondness for The Smiths.

The most problematic ambivalences concern Morrissey's various quasi-nationalist gestures since the group's split in 1987. These receive relatively little discussion here; the emphasis is on The Smiths' work as a band (although mentions of bassist Andy Rourke and drummer Mike Joyce are sparse). Nonetheless, the collection, particularly through essays by Julian Stringer, Kari Kallioniemi and Nabeel Zuberi, boldly confronts the unsettling ambivalence of Morrissey's comments on 'race' in Smiths-era interviews. Sean Campbell, meanwhile, provides an informed, eloquent chapter on the four Smiths' second-generation Irish heritage.

The essays are as varied in style as in subject matter. As such, the book provides diverse examples of historicizing and indeed writing about popular music. Jonathan Hiam confronts tendencies for earlier academic studies concerning the genre to focus somewhat exclusively on lyrics. He proceeds to outline 'musical poetics' as a methodology for addressing words and music with reference to 'Shoplifters of the World Unite' (1987). In the collection's most experimental and questioning essay, Nabeel Zuberi reflects on The Smiths' significance to Islam, to Northern England, and to place itself as a concept.

The editors reiterate John Peel's observations that the band's 'boldly innovative songs had few obvious reference points, and seemed "to have not been influenced by anything that preceded them"' (11). Yet, Peel—uncharacteristically for the late DJ and cultural observer—might have missed something more widely significant. As *Why Pamper Life's Complexities?* inspiringly testifies, The Smiths' work marked a culmination of highly diverse influences, and the ways in which these were combined created something genuinely new. Comparable with the work of David Bowie, Kate Bush, Antony Hegarty and Lady Gaga, that of The Smiths carries an aesthetic radicalism which, while having plenty of its own distinctive traits, is made all the more absorbing by its fermentation of so many formative influences. This book as a whole conveys how the band drew from canonized literature as credibly as they did from what popular culture's own bourgeoisie have more recently called 'guilty' pleasures. Each chapter differently suggests how to listen to The Smiths is to listen to a sublimely subjective history of culture itself, in which supposed distinctions between 'high' and 'popular' are unostentatiously rejected. The essays thus work superbly as a collection, displaying how, via The Smiths, Sandie Shaw meets Oscar Wilde, Guy Fawkes joins T. Rex, Andy Warhol enters *Coronation Street* and George Formby harmonizes with Kazem Al Saher. Meanwhile, through the book's recurrent considerations of The Smiths' Manchester origins, Hulme coexists with Hollywood, and unemployment crosses with Catholicism.

The near-mystical importance of dramatist Shelagh Delaney to The Smiths' lyrics and iconography is given frequent attention in the book. However, readers who attended the 2005 conference may be disappointed that one of the most impassioned and informed papers—Michael Calderbank's 'More to Life Than Books?: The Literary Sensibilities of The Smiths'—is absent here. Nonetheless, it is a delight to re-encounter the paper of Calderbank's co-panellist, Cecilia Mello, discussing how kitchen-sink drama influenced Morrissey, and how Smiths tracks have been used in film and TV productions. Mello's social and cultural historicizing of kitchen-sink drama is impressive in its own right; she also offers fresh, thought-provoking comparisons of The Smiths with The Beatles as bands crucially

influenced by working-class culture. Mello makes a brief but persuasive case that Paul McCartney 'pioneered Morrissey's habit of quoting from kitchen-sink films in his lyrics, and hinted at the impact they would still have twenty years on' (140).

Sheila Whiteley's chapter on childhood, sexuality and The Smiths explores Morrissey's lyrics at their darkest—darkest in terms of mystery, at least. Whiteley discusses how, in the various Smiths' songs carrying connotations of childhood sexual abuse, 'the use of "I/Me/You" within a fictionalised mini-narrative—in which the author takes the leading role—heightens dramatic effect' (104). Surveying how the BBC, *The Sun* and *Sounds* magazine responded to this theme in The Smiths' songs, as well as offering her highly perceptive commentary on lyrical and musical content, Whiteley presents a range of significant questions about the relationship between music, sexuality and gender.

Similarly haunting is Kieran Cashell's chapter 'Suicide, Philosophy and The Smiths', an engaging, if implicit, testimony to how popular music can enhance or indeed initiate philosophical reflection. This chapter may also call into question the worth of philosophy (or theory) in writings on popular music, or indeed any art. Cashell references over a dozen philosophers, including Heraclitus, Kierkegaard and Foucault, as well as Woolf, Camus, Plath and, indeed, Morrissey. Focusing on The Smiths' 'Asleep' (1985), Cashell offers an extensively informed discussion, that may also—usefully—prompt us to reconsider whether such dense theoretical contextualization can, paradoxically, risk undermining a text's own, self-sufficient philosophical content. Extending the frames of reference as far as possible within a single chapter is, as Cashell shows, enlightening. However, it could also prompt a rethink of the need (or not) for popular music studies to so emphatically legitimize its subject (or itself) by honouring historically dominant academic reference points—and to consider what alternatives there might be. Cashell nonetheless succeeds in presenting a fascinating essay not only on The Smiths and 'Asleep', but on the political significance of suicide itself.

Questions concerning the historiography of popular music are brought to the fore in a highly timely response to journalistic misrepresentations of cultural studies. In 'The Media, Academia and The Smiths', Fergus Campbell, one of the conference's co-organizers, reports on his communications with journalists before the conference and compares these with the widespread coverage given to the event from various media quarters. After quoting a TV news researcher who expressed interest in the symposium because it was 'bringing together two completely different worlds—academia and pop music', Campbell discusses how, actually, the two different worlds brought together by the event 'were not the realms of academia and popular music ... but rather those of academia and the media' (195). The distortions that Campbell finds in the resulting media coverage are sometimes chill-

ing. It is worth remembering that cultural studies as a discipline has been marked by its highly questioning approaches to mass media. Yet Campbell's approach, honouring The Smiths' legacy through its combination of self-consciousness with irony, is humorous and indeed heartening. After presenting a marvellously articulate consideration of how the work of popular music studies scholars is not always so different from that of music journalists, Campbell concludes that perhaps the conference's real lesson is that journalists and academics, 'rather than engaging in spurious turf wars over who has the "right" to write about pop', should engage and learn more from each other (202).

Karl Maton's poignant chapter on The Smiths' followers (drawing on his own 1990s research correspondence) will be valuable to any scholars of fandom. Whether they intended to or not, The Smiths inspired their fans to become integral to the band's own image in ways that few popular artists have managed. While (surprisingly) ignoring Willy Russell's 2000 novel *The Wrong Boy*—itself a commentary on Smiths fandom—this collection is the product of individuals from various segments of that following. Perhaps it also says something about The Smiths that what unites these chapters and, indeed, these writers, is a passionate yet also critical engagement not just with the songs, but the wider worlds from which they came, and most significantly, the band's (mostly) radical aesthetics and politics.