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POPULAR CULTURE AND HISTORY: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST IN BRITISH POPULAR MUSIC OF THE 2000S

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**POPULAR CULTURE AND HISTORY:
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST IN BRITISH POPULAR
MUSIC OF THE 2000S²**

This paper investigates the basic mechanisms of representation of the past in British popular music in the early 2000s. Changes in the music industry associated with the emerging and wide dissemination of new media has affected the search for new musical decisions, reformatting attitudes to the past in general, and to the musical past in particular. In this regard, questions of historical representations in popular music and their relationship with cultural heritage are closely interrelated. This paper analyses the mechanisms and formats of ‘working’ with the past in British popular music of the 2000s using examples from the London rock band, *the Libertines*. The author draws conclusions about structure of historical representations in popular music and their typology. The use of *popular music studies* approach is suggested to analyze mechanisms of representation of the past and broaden the concept of popular music.

JEL Classification: Z

Key words: popular culture, popular music, cultural heritage, representations of the past, popular music studies, the Libertines

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**POPULAR CULTURE AND HISTORY:
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The Libertines had something of the kitchen sink about them, something of Blake, something of the Clash, something of the Smiths, something of Dickens, something of the fin de siècle dandy, something of the Pogues. They rejected trainers and baseball caps and embraced brogues and fedoras. For thousands of NME-reading, literate rock'n'rollers, it was an intoxicating combination.

From the review of Anthony Thornton and Roger Sargent's book "The Libertines: Bound Together" (2006) in "The Independent"³

Explanation of historical knowledge is rooted in the specification of relationship between 'historical' materials and subjects to both its 'reception' and 'usage'. Regarding the first, there has been a tendency to associate history with the academic community, as though historical knowledge is produced by historians and deals only with the past. A crucial theoretical question has been "how to develop ways of understanding the concept of the past in terms of its temporal definitions?" However, the past as a part of temporal distinction is 'used' in different symbolic systems: art, religion, everyday knowledge, etc.⁴

For the last 15-20 years representations of the past have become a point of intense discussion in the social sciences and humanities.⁵ Questions concerning the representations of the past through historical images are an integral part of the debates regarding 'high' art such as literature, painting or classical music.⁶ Similar concepts have been developed in relation to opera,⁷ where the imagery of some specific historical subjects, world-shaking events and

³ Hodgkinson, T. The Libertines: Bound Together, by Anthony Thornton & Roger Sargent // The Independent, 2006, March, 19. URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-libertines-bound-together-by-anthony-thornton-amp-roger-sargent-470534.html> (accessed 10/06/2014).

⁴ Savelieva I.M., Poletayev A.V. The Types of Knowledge about the Past (Савельева И.М., Полетаев А.В. Типы знания о прошлом) // Phenomenon of History. Ed. by Irina Savelieva and Andrei Poletayev. Moscow: HSE, 2005. pp. 16–17.

⁵ E.g.: de Groot, J. Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture. London: Routledge, 2008; Phenomenon of History. Ed. by Irina Savelieva and Andrei Poletayev. Moscow: HSE, 2005.

⁶ E.g.: Lawson, C., Stowell, R. The Historical Performance of Music: An Introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Butt, J. Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Music of the Past, Instruments and Imagination: Proceedings of the Harmoniques International Congress, Lausanne 2004. Publikationen der Schweizerischen Musikforschenden Gesellschaft. Ed. by Michael Latcham. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006.

⁷ Cf.: Locke, R.P. Constructing the Oriental "Other": Saint-Saens's "Samson et Dalila" // Cambridge Opera Journal, 1991, No 3, pp. 261–303; Jellinek, G. History through the Opera Glass: From the Rise of Caesar to the Fall of Napoleon. New York: Limelight Editions, 1994; Ketterer, R. Ancient Rome in Early Opera. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

personalities are easily ‘read’ by the listener/viewer. In other words, opera has heightened the importance of history used as artistic language. To illustrate this, George Jellinek analyse opera *Rinaldo* by George Frideric Handel composed in 1711 that was the first Italian language opera written specifically for the London stage. A story of love, battle and redemption set at the time of the First Crusade was a complete triumph and made Handel operatic celebrity. Jellinek shows how historical personalities such as Godfrey of Bouillon was portrayed, the events of the First Crusade in Jerusalem were interpreted, and their meaning in this type of opera.⁸

Among the new objects of interest emerging from the study of the representations of the past, mass culture is an important one. However, attention is increasingly paid to the visual arts, especially cinema.⁹ Specifically, ‘nostalgia cinema’ and ‘heritage cinema’ emerged in the 1990s, involving a sophisticated attempt to scrutinize historical images and their representational mechanisms.¹⁰ Those cultural forms provide a lot of convincing examples that are easier to analyze in terms of representation because of their figurative and narrative nature. Meanwhile, popular music is also able to ‘use’ the past as a tool for the expression of contemporary cultural content. According to Jerome de Groot,¹¹ historical images in contemporary popular culture are numerous and varied, and have a large influence even on academic historical knowledge. Epistemologically, historical themes are multiple and can be represented in cultural forms in different ways. The complexity of popular music specifies a wide variability of work with the past and historical images at different levels.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In order to explain the ‘usage’ of the past in popular music, attention has to be paid to a number of complex considerations: first, the understanding of popular music peculiarities; second, the development of a methodology for analyzing the representations of the past in popular music; third, focusing on one particular case analysis.

Research methodology

Numerous attempts have been made to deepen and push forward the understanding of music and its nature. Traditional research fields are musicology and the sociology of music. Each discipline developed particular research approaches to music analysis. Musicologists study the

⁸ Jellinek, G. History through the Opera Glass. pp. 21–30.

⁹ E.g.: Hayward, S. Cinema Studies. Cinema Studies. The Key Concepts. London: Routledge, 2000; Gray, A., Bell, E. History on Television. London: Routledge, 2013.

¹⁰ E.g.: Rosenstone R. Visions of the Past: the Challenge of Film to our Idea of History. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995; Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past. Ed. by R.A. Rosenstone. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995; Samutina N.V. The ideology of nostalgia: the problem of the past in contemporary European cinema. Studies in the Humanities. WP6. Moscow: HSE, 2005. No. 1; Perspectives on European Film and History. Ed. by L. Engelen, R. Vande Winkel. Gent: Academia Press, 2007; The History on Film Reader. Ed. by M. Hughes-Warrington. London: Routledge, 2009;

¹¹ de Groot. Consuming History. pp. 4–5.

composition structure of musical notation and the correspondence of a piece to a certain canon, paying less attention to the musical performance and reception by the listener. Sociologists are focused primarily on the nature of production, distribution and consumption of the music, as well as the place of music in the process of discernment and differentiation of social groups. With the development of popular music, a profound interest in its study has begun. However, the legitimacy of the ‘presence of popular music’ in academic discourse has been disputed.

An initial point to make is that neither musicology nor sociology could bring a sufficient explanation to the representations of the past in popular music; the narrow focus of these traditions does not allow seeing the majority of popular music features. The implications tend to remain at an implicit level. In many cases, if they were fully specified they would have been found to contradict other aspects of the theory in question. In this regard, the tradition of cultural studies provides the most efficient way of understanding popular culture and popular music.

In this study, I will apply the *popular music studies approach*, but broaden the concept of popular music to include social institutions, practices and relations, where certain areas of cultural understanding are the result of a complex set of interactions between these social institutions. Popular music studies emerged in England in the early 1980s as a combination of social science and humanities methodologies. Characterizing popular music studies, Martin Cloonan points out that this field includes theoretical approaches of “musicology, media and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, ethnomusicology, psychology, social history and cultural geography.”¹² In this framework, popular music is understood not only as a musical product, but definitely as a concept that should be considered in the context of popular culture.¹³ Such a view involves not only the analysis of the conditions and practices of production, the features of the text and musical forms, and the modes of music consumption, but also the specifics of the discourses, various social practices, and ways of listening, browsing and buying popular music. The governing principle of popular music studies is the transition from textual analysis (i.e. the use of scores and other texts as the primary source) to the study of social institutions and cultural practices through which popular music functions in contemporary culture: the music industry, recording methods, presentation methods and distribution of musical

¹² Cloonan, M. What is Popular Music Studies? Some Observations // British Journal of Music Education, 2005, Vol. 22, No 1, p. 82.

¹³ E.g.: Frith, S. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996; Middleton, R. *Studying Popular Music*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990; Negus, K. *Popular Music in Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996; Toynbee, J. *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*. Oxford: Bloomsbury USA, 2000; Longhurst, B. *Popular Music and Society*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007; Shuker, R. *Understanding Popular Music*. London: Routledge, 2001; Frith, S. *The Sociology of Rock (Communication and Society)*. London: Constable, 1978; Bennett, A., Shank, B., Toynbee, J. *The Popular Music Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 2006; Shuker, R. *Popular Music: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2005; Shuker, R. *Understanding Popular Music*. London: Routledge, 2013; Wall, T. *Studying Popular Music Culture*. London: SAGE, 2003; Wicke, P. *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Williamson J., Cloonan M. *Rethinking the Music Industry // Popular Music*, 2007, Vol. 26, No 2, pp. 305–322.

products, the audiences and the different ways of reception, etc. This brief observation suggests that popular music is a complex cultural phenomenon.

The following questions were the starting points for my investigation: How are representations of the past constructed in popular music? How are statements about the past arranged, what do they represent, and what/who do they focus on? What kind of “history” is constructed in popular music?

I will draw attention to the key features of the representation practices at all levels of popular music: production, presentation and reception. Mechanisms of historical representation are mediated through symbolic practices that constantly change. This corresponds to the specifics of popular music and its multi-level accounts, the modes of its function, as well as the basic institutions of popular music (recording, distribution and audience). Therefore, the ‘image of the past’ cannot be ‘read’ only at one level – it should include relationships between all levels.

The beginning of the 2000s marked a new stage in the history of British and world popular music. A transformation started due to the emergence and widespread dissemination of new media. A new look at the current situation and the search for new musical concepts had an impact on attitudes to the past in general, and to the musical past in particular. This research is focused on the representations of the past in the music of the London rock band, *the Libertines*, who formed on the retro-rock revival wave at the end of 1990s and were proclaimed “the band of our generation.”¹⁴

The Libertines: people who still wear the jackets

The 1990s were marked by the emergence of a powerful musical movement known as *Britpop*. The movement developed as a reaction against various musical and cultural trends in the late-1980s and early-1990s, particularly the grunge phenomenon from the United States, as well as the new social and political direction of the British government and internal political conflicts with Ireland. The Britpop musical language (core of musical culture of the 1990s) provided links to the British guitar music of the 1960s and 1970s and uniquely British topics. Typical representatives of this movement were bands such as *Blur*, *Oasis*, *Pulp*, *The Verve*, and *Suede*. These links were included in a wide symbolical space of British musical heritage and became a part of historical representations. All this was accepted by the British musicians of the 2000s.

After the peak of rave culture in the UK, the 2000s became quite different from previous periods in the history of British popular music. As it was noted earlier, this was connected with

¹⁴ NME’s Best Album of All Time Revealed // New Musical Express, 2006, January, 26. URL: <http://www.nme.com/news/arctic-monkeys/22062> (accessed 10/06/2014).

the mass appreciation and the refinement of its own past. It was not just reflected in the song topics or album themes, but such a tendency radically changed the very structure of the popular music industry. If the Britpop cultural phenomenon was associated with attempts to continue the British music history and heritage, the musicians of the 2000s changed the modus of 'working' with the past, although continuing many musical practices of the 1990s. Simon Reynolds, an English music critic, called this new phenomenon 'Retromania'.¹⁵ As Reynolds notes, no major musical genres emerged out of the 2000s. To some extent this 'genre crisis' was offset by the revival and the subsequent development of a number of alternative rock sub-genres. Principally, it was garage rock and post-punk based on the style of previous decades (blues and pop-rock of the 1960s, punk-rock of the 1970s, etc.) which led the way for the new retro flavoured groups called, *The Revival Movement*. Jerome de Groot,¹⁶ who studies the 'consumption' of history in contemporary popular culture, describes such processing of the previous periods through the concept of 're-enactment', i.e. recovery that can be observed in modern British popular music. The shifting cultural accents set a new trend in the treatment of the past.

The first line of guitar rock revival came from the music of the American blues-rock band, *the White Stripes*, based on a blues style, metal riffs, punk rock energy, garage presentation of the material, and the use of elements of folk and country music. Another line of retro rock revival was developed by guitar post-punk and Britpop, represented primarily by the British rock bands, such as *the Killers*, *Franz Ferdinand*, *Arctic Monkeys*, and *the Libertines*.

The Libertines formed in London in the late 1990s, lasted until the mid-2000s and only released two albums: "Up The Bracket" (October, 2002) and "The Libertines" (August, 2004). The core of the group was a pair of singers Peter Doherty (guitar, vocals) and Carl Barât (vocals, guitar). Later they were joined by bass-player, John Hassall, and drummer, Gary Powell. In late 2001, the band signed with the largest British independent record label "Rough Trade Records." As the managers of "Rough Trade Records" note, *the Libertines* were initially considered a group that "had to become Britain's answer to the revival movement of guitar rock."¹⁷ The management of the band was originally planned in the context of the movement of retro-rock revival, developing their Britpop tendencies.

It is significant to mention that the group managers were musicians in bands that had cult statuses in British musical culture and largely influenced the music and image of *the Libertines*. Initially, Bernard Butler, an ex-guitarist of the popular British alternative rock band of the 1990s, *Suede*, was chosen to become *the Libertines* producer and to record their first album. But later

¹⁵ Reynolds, S. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*. London: Faber and Faber, 2011.

¹⁶ de Groot. *Consuming History*. p. 124.

¹⁷ Sinclair, D. *Rough Trade: The label That Changed Music History* // *The Independent*. 2006. Friday, September, 8. URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/rough-trade-the-label-that-changed-music-history-415021.html> (accessed 10/06/2014).

the producer was changed to Mick Jones, a former guitarist of the cult 1970s British punk-rock band, *the Clash*. As Peter Doherty mentioned ¹⁸, it was the starting point in the history of the band: image, sound, style and presentation were developed and shaped by Mick Jones. It also should be noted that the iconic band look were the musicians dressed in British redcoat uniform jackets) that was first presented on the press shot for the magazine *New Musical Express* in 2002. This image was widely loved by the public, associating it with *The Revival Movement* of the 2000s, and becoming one of the sparkling links to previous musical experiences.

Such a shift in the revival of guitar rock contributed to the re-actualization of the musical past. The result was a series of manipulations with the recording equipment, selection of musical instruments, mixing of the material, as well as with the style and performance.

‘Using’ and ‘processing’ the past in popular music

The first component of historical representation is *production perspective*: recording techniques, musical instruments and song arrangements. Both albums were recorded using vintage musical equipment and minimal digital sound processing. The analog recording equipment made it sound as close as possible to chamber music groups of the 1960s and 1970s. The musical instruments used were only electric guitars, acoustic guitars, bass guitars and drums.

The minimal arrangements of their songs emphasized their ‘raw’ and sloppy sound and expose all the ‘roughness’ of the musical texture. It should also be noted that guitarists Carl Barât and Peter Doherty used (and currently continue this practice) rare vintage guitars during recording and concert performances. Peter Doherty often used Gibson guitars of the 1960s: a Gibson Epiphone Coronet and a Gibson ES-330¹⁹. As noted by Carl Barât²⁰ in his memoirs, complicated manipulations of the recordings were not important for the group – the debut album of *the Libertines* was recorded in three days. All this vintage equipment supported the sound that the band wanted to achieve and also helped them to stylize their performances similar to the 1960s.

The songs on both albums can be described as post-punk or retro punk. Not offering their audience new musical solutions, *the Libertines* based themselves on earlier periods in the history of popular music: British beat and blues groups of the 1960s (like *the Small Faces*); the leaders of the British Invasion, *the Beatles* and *the Kinks*; garage rock and punk rock of the 1970s (*the Stooges*, *the Clash* and *Sex Pistols*); and the new wave apologists, *the Jam* and *the Smiths*. In an interview taken in 2004, Peter Doherty described his musical influences:

¹⁸ Doherty, P. *The Books of Albion*. London: Orion Publishing Group, 2009. p. 69. URL: <http://www.babyshambles.net/books.asp> (accessed 10/06/2014).

¹⁹ The Sound of The Libertines // Guitar Player, 2007, October, 26. URL: <http://guitarplayer.wordpress.com/2007/10/26/the-sound-of-the-libertines/> (accessed 10/06/2014).

²⁰ Barât, C. *Threepenny Memoir: The Lives of a Libertine*. London: HarperCollins UK, 2010. p. 13.

After discovering The Smiths, I followed the trail back to The Buzzcocks and I was well into The Only Ones – melodic bands who had a bit of a dirty sound. And then New York Dolls – I fell in love with them – and The Stooges. The driving aggressive stuff that I like is the English punk and the New York era. Carl’s [Carl Barât, the Libertines’ other singer] more the metal side of it – he was into Rage Against the Machine and Iron Maiden when he was a kid²¹.

While listening to the recordings, it almost seems that the musicians are playing for themselves – improvising and changing the tempo from the rhythmically fast to calm without any specific genre framework. This combination of previous musical eras and desire not only to recreate its musical component, but also to share some of its flavour, can be noted on both albums of *the Libertines*. They include songs made in different styles of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s: from British beat and classic rock to punk and funk. For example, the songs, “Death on the Stairs”, “The Boy Looked at Johnny” (album “Up the Bracket”, 2002) or “What Katie Did” (album “The Libertines”, 2004), are based on British beat of the 1960s, with a smooth rhythm corresponding to the manner of performance and choral parties. The songs, “The Good Old Days”, “Horrorshow” (album “Up the Bracket”, 2002), or “Arbeit Macht Frei” (album “The Libertines”, 2004), are examples of punk songs: the simple accompaniment, the accelerated rhythm, typical manner of singing and shouting the words of the song (sometimes imitating Joe Strummer from *the Clash*). The song, “The Man Who Would Be King” (album “The Libertines”, 2004) is similar to *the Smiths*’ songs and guitar indie-rock of 1980s: simple steady rhythm, easy guitar solos, and a relaxed, slightly subdued manner of singing.

The musicians of *the Libertines* were often compared to musicians of previous eras in terms of rock music authenticity, energy and power as it was in the 1960s or 1970s. In general, *the Libertines*’ image was characterized as a hybrid of *the Smiths* and *the Clash* with the rock and roll/punk sound and image.²² These notions, as very important for rock music culture, were articulated in relation to the group by journalists, group managers and listeners. This authenticity expressed total communion of the British musical tradition and the past; however, not as a mere imitation, but still creating something new. Music critic Robert Christgau notes that “as more generations stumble upon a tradition that goes back to the early Beatles, the trick gets harder and

²¹ *Whaite, Ph.* This Charming Man: An Interview with Pete Doherty Music w // Socialist Review, 2004, April. URL: <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=8852> (accessed 10/06/2014).

²² See: *Thornton, A., Thornton, A., Sargent, R.* The Libertines Bound Together: the Story of Peter Doherty and Carl Barât and how They Changed British Music. London: Little, Brown Book Group Limited, 2006. p. 144.

harder to pull off, especially in a new way. London's Libertines do it in a new way."²³ The musicians of *the Libertines* were usually described as "young *Beatles*", or "young *Clash*", or "young *Smiths*" (British rock bands that were associated with the establishment of new musical trends and later traditions). For example, recalling his work with the band during the recording of their first album, the A&R manager at Rough Trade Records characterized the musicians in these terms:

*They didn't come on until 2am and so I was completely twatted by that time but I swear to god it was like watching The Beatles in Hamburg 1961. Pete looked like Sid Vicious reincarnated as a some weird French poet guy from a Henry Miller novel and all their fans were these grubby, beautiful young indie kids that you never saw at mainstream indie rock gigs. The whole scene was just punk and glamorous and grubby as anything I've ever seen*²⁴.

The second major component of *the Libertines*' songs was the processing of cultural traditions in the broadest sense: literature, cinema and customs. Their song lyrics contain a large number of references, metaphors, allusions and intertextual connections, hidden and direct quotes from different books, songs, movies, and other cultural artefacts of British and world culture. Quite standard in their design (verse-chorus-verse-chorus), the band's songs were written in a rich poetic language with a variety of images and links to the past, mediated through various literary and television personalities. The processing of the cultural past became not only the artistic technique, but also a tool to talk about the present – a way of self-determination.

The first element of that cultural tradition was literature, especially poetry of decadence, fin de siècle literature and neo-romanticism. The lyrics of *the Libertines*' songs included a lot of quotes and allusions. For the musicians, literature became a powerful means of expression; they often associated themselves with literary characters, using phrases from books and poems. For example, the song "Horrorshow" (album "Up The Bracket", 2002) includes plot references to Anthony Burgess' novel, "A Clockwork Orange" (1962), as well as language references (like the song's title). The song is an expression of the narrator's experiences, his desire to change and awareness about the inevitability of the collapse of all his aspirations ("It's a horror show, you should come on round"). Similarly, the title and content of the song, "The Man Who Would Be King" (album "The Libertines", 2004), contains references to the short story by Rudyard

²³ Christgau, R. Carpe Diem // Rolling Stone, 2003, April, 3. URL: <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cdrev/libertines-rs.php> (accessed 10/06/2014).

²⁴ Endeacott, J. I Love The Libertines // Vice Media, 2005. URL: <http://www.vice.com/read/i-love-v11n3> (accessed 10/06/2014).

Kipling, “The Man Who Would Be King” (1888), about two British ex-soldiers who set off from 19th century British India in search of adventure and end up as kings of Kafiristan (now part of Afghanistan).

Oscar Wilde was one of the central literary personalities for the musicians. Describing his childhood and youth, Carl Barât repeatedly emphasizes the role of Wilde’s works on the formation of his worldview and lyrics²⁵. In diaries²⁶ and interviews, Peter Doherty called Oscar Wilde one of the key figures in his life, helping to form his poetic language: “It was always my dream to study literature and to write. It fell by the wayside a little bit, but yeah, an amazing writer and amazing inspiration.”²⁷ Identifying himself with Wilde, with the characters of his poems and novels, Peter Doherty often described himself as Narcissus in interviews. There are a lot of direct links to the writer and references to the characters of his novels:

*They’re just narcissists
Well wouldn’t it be nice to be Dorian Gray?
Just for a day
They’re just narcissists
Oh, what’s so great to be Dorian Gray
Every day?*²⁸

As a part of the literary tradition the musicians used two key concepts: “Arcadia” and “Albion”. On the one hand, these terms were the elements of the cultural past; on the other hand, for the musicians these terms became tools for talking about the present. The image of Arcadia, borrowed from Greek mythology, was the basis of a story, conceived by Carl Barât and Peter Doherty. The musicians imagined themselves as sailors on a ship named “Albion”, sailing from the coast of the UK to the beautiful country of Arcadia, following in the discourse of William Blake. The land of Arcadia was utopia – the musicians’ personal safe-space-place where no rules or authority could be found. This story became an integral part of not only the artistic language of the musicians, but also a bright part of their image: the musicians talked about Arcadia and Albion in interviews and used these concepts in live performances as well as in everyday life. Describing the place of these notions in the symbolic space of the musicians, Carl Barât writes in his memoirs:

²⁵ Barât. Threepenny Memoir. p. 21.

²⁶ Doherty. The Books of Albion. p. 39.

²⁷ Pete Doherty’s Dublin Trinity College Speech In Full // New Musical Express, 2009, February, 17. URL: <http://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/pete-dohertys-dublin-trinity-college-speech-in-full#fAEdjaumZgRiyVCg.99> (accessed 10/06/2014).

²⁸ The song “Narcissist” from the album “The Libertines” (2004).

*We held Albion and Arcadia close, twisted it into our own philosophy; we changed and mutated it along the way. It was our own personal mythology, our idiosyncratic, romantic ideal. It was the Greek myths with England at their heart: Homer and Blake.*²⁹

Along with the romanticized images of Albion and Arcadia, the musicians often used mythical or real characters associated with British cultural tradition. The image of Anglo-Saxon warrior queen, Boudicca, surrounded by a kind of widely romantic cult during the reign of Queen Elizabeth and Victoria became one of these images. On the one hand, the musicians used these notions as a symbol of poetic Britain; on the other hand, “Albion” and “Arcadia” were tools used to search for a place in reality and a way of self-identification. For example, in the song, “The Good Old Days” (album “Up The Bracket”, 2002), the musicians draw utopian poetic pictures of Britain – where the musicians wanted to be:

Queen Boadicea is long dead and gone

Still the spirit

In her children’s children’s children

It lives on

.....

The Arcadian dream has all fallen through

*But the Albion sails on course*³⁰

The next element of processing cultural tradition in *the Libertines’* songs is cinema – the British movies of the 1950–1970s in particular. In an interview about his passion for literature, Peter Doherty also notes the significance of the British cinema and television in his cultural preferences:

I’m interested in William Blake, but there are less spiritual, more practical people like Galton and Simpson, and Joe Orton, who were interested in the fineries of everyday dialogue and puns. In the same way that I immersed myself in The Smiths, I did the same with a lot of aspects of English culture. I was obsessed with certain writers, certain styles of film. Those kitchen sink films, like Billy Liar, hit me right in the heart. I suppose I did live inside those films for want of a better place to be. The films I watched were about a

²⁹ *Barât*. Threepenny Memoir. pp. 3–4.

³⁰ The song “Good Old Days” from the album “Up The Bracket” (2002).

*pride, a dignity and a respect for people who you feel you belong with – a community and a mutual respect.*³¹

For example, “What Became of the Likely Lads” (album “The Libertines”, 2004), contains a reference to the famous 1960s British sitcom, “The Likely Lads”, about the lives of two young people who came from the working class. A prominent movie figure in *the Libertines’* music was a British actor and comedian, Tony Hancock. Peter Doherty was a big fan of Hancock’s Half Hour, a BBC radio comedy, and later television comedy, series of the 1950s and 1960s. The title of the album, “Up The Bracket” (2002), contains references to the phrases used by T. Hancock in an episode of the show, “The Missing Page”: “Are you looking for a punch up the bracket? I’ll give you a punch up the bracket”³².

The second component of the historical representations in *the Libertines’* songs is ***presentation and reception perspective***: the image of the band, their live performances and their audience. As already noted, the band’s music was described in terms of rock authenticity; the same could be said about their concerts. Mainly gigging small venues (clubs or pubs), the musicians staged extremely energetic and emotional performances, but often without worrying about sound quality. The behaviour of the musicians on stage was very similar to the performances of punk bands: constant motion around the stage, stage diving, broken musical instruments, etc. Describing his impressions of *the Libertines* concert, Tom Hodgkinson writes:

*A few days after they had played to 2,000 people at the Brixton Academy, I saw them play a gig for about 100 fans at the Duke of Clarence pub in Islington. It blew me away. The sound was pretty awful and you could barely see the band, but the energy and life was thrilling, like seeing the Beatles at the Cavern.*³³

The essential component of *the Libertines’* live performances became poetic breaks. Often aggressive and quick sets would alternate with lyrical inserts: Doherty read poetry; the musicians actively communicated with the audience, signed autographs and took pictures. They would often interrupt their energetic performances and recite poems by Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Siegfried Sassoon, Emily Dickinson, and others. In particular, while receiving an NME Award in 2004, Peter Doherty and Carl Barât read the poem by S. Sassoon “Suicide in the

³¹ *Waite*. This Charming Man.

³² The Roots Of... The Libertines // New Musical Express, 2013, January, 22. URL: <http://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/the-roots-of-the-libertines> (accessed 10/06/2014).

³³ *Hodgkinson*. The Libertines.

trenches” (1917), dedicated to the horrors of the First World War.³⁴ It should also be noted that at performances the musicians were often dressed in the beat style of the 1960s or costumes in the music hall style (white shirts with collars and lace, hats, jackets) and had a very eccentric manner. They frequently wore British redcoat uniform jackets, which became extremely popular among their fans.

Another important aspect was the nature of the relationship with the audience, their demeanour and self-presentation. Performances of *the Libertines* were, above all, live concerts, which blurred the boundaries between the musicians and the audience: fans were free to go on stage to greet and embrace the musicians, the audience was involved in the action on stage, and the music was listened to by the body. *The Libertines* created unprecedented intimacy in the relationship with the audience, which, as noted by Tim Jonze, broke down “the barriers between artists and fans like no British group since punk”³⁵. From the very beginning of their career the band members were organizing home concerts and inviting outside people. They use the Internet to spread invitations to concerts in the living room of the apartment rented by Barât and Doherty in London named, “The Albion Rooms”. Those who came found themselves witnessing and participating in a ‘guerrilla’ concert, where the line between the band and the fans was virtually erased. One of the fans who managed to visit this concert describes it as follows:

*They blasted a really raw, punky, sweaty set out for half an hour. But at home I’d be listening to the Clash, the Sex Pistols, Joy Division, and it seemed like there was a band right here in front of me who were giving us the same raw, unpolished rebellion.*³⁶

Using message boards and forums as well as the traditional music press, *the Libertines* increased the pace of band/fan interaction and helped create a generational divide in which older, less tech-savvy music fans with less time on their hands could not participate. The ability to organise a concert in a few hours, posting the announcement on the official website, eliminated all the middlemen between the musicians and the audience. *The Libertines’* website turned into a channel of communication. Internet technologies brought new ways of communication between the musicians and their audience. As Carl Barât’s writes in the memoirs:

Later, after we were signed, the so-called ‘guerrilla’ gigs would take over the mantle. They came about because, by that time, the internet was becoming a force in

³⁴ See: NME Award // *The Libertines*. *The Libertines Boys in the Band*. New York, cop 2004. DVD 68:23-69:45.

³⁵ Jonze, T. *The Libertines and Their Fans* // *The Guardian*, 2010, August, 17. URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/aug/17/libertines-fans> (accessed 10/06/2014).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

*everyone's lives, and we were knocked sideways by the way you could post 'Gig tomorrow night' on a forum somewhere and, as if by magic, people would turn up. The guerrilla gigs were chaotic and disorganized because there was no time to sort anything out, and precious little money, too, but the fact that people would turn up was a real buzz.*³⁷

As one of *the Libertines'* fan describes this practice:

*"There are fewer more distressing sights than that / Of an Englishman in a baseball cap" [Song "Time for heroes"] are classic British pop songs, it's more that the Libertines were just as much about the adventure. You could draw parallels with the Sex Pistols or the early Manic Street Preachers, but what separated the Libertines was their understanding of the internet.*³⁸

The concept of "Albion" and "Arcadia" were involved in the daily lives of the musicians, becoming a tool for describing and talking about the present. The image, appearance, language, Cockney accent, speech and self-presentation of *the Libertines* aimed to highlight their Englishness. For example, on the first band photo shoot for the cover of the *New Musical Express* magazine, the musicians used the British flag as a background, brought by Peter Doherty, who was dressed in a rare football jersey of the English Premier League in 1982. As pointed out by Anthony Thornton³⁹, Carl Barât and Peter Doherty used to go by the London Underground in stylized special suits and hats. In a lot of photo shoots and videos, the musicians used the British flag. This was also a reference to the cultural past and traditions, originating from *the Kinks* and later becoming a part of British popular music history.

On the whole, the musicians easily played with the past, referring to various historical eras, personalities and plots. Aply operating with musical styles of the past, they nevertheless largely focused on the present. Rather than attempting to revive or reconstruct the past, they included it as a set of creative tools to describe and talk about the present. We do not find in the songs and music of *the Libertines* a yearning for a bygone era or a violent desire to return the past – the band's creativity was not steeped in the mood of nostalgia. On the contrary, all the songs actively addressed the subjects of the present – they were about modern London, about modern England and its youth music culture describing its everyday life, its problems, dreams, etc.

Conclusion

³⁷ Barât. *Threepenny Memoir*. p. 14.

³⁸ Jonze. *The Libertines and Their Fans*.

³⁹ Thornton, Thornton, Sargent. *The Libertines Bound Together*. p. 70.

Like the Britpop bands before them, *The Libertines*' exhibited an appreciation for cultures that they were too young to have experienced directly themselves. On the one hand, *the Libertines* recycled the British musical tradition. As a result, it was possible to observe a patchwork collage of different musical styles from the past, combined in a single song, or in the format of a single album. This tendency might be diagnosed as a symptom of Fredric Jameson's⁴⁰ cultural amnesia that is able "to transmit, store, retrieve, reconfigure and invoke the past in new and specific ways"; or, more conventionally, a sign of youthful longing for an always gone 'golden age' of English popular music, be it the 1960s, 1970s or any other period. Raymond Williams uses the appealing but slippery term 'structure of feeling' to describe the perceptible quality and pattern of life as it is engendered by a particular culture. A structure of feeling is not directly accessible to those who have not experienced it, but a form of access is granted by "the arts of a period ... For here, if anywhere, this [structure of feeling] is likely to be expressed".⁴¹ Therefore, in retrieving past sounds and styles that are already part of a 'selective tradition' of English popular music, *the Libertines*, like *Oasis* and *Blur* before them, evoke a structure of feeling that cannot help but be haunted by the ghosts of England's past. Moreover, this tendency was marked by the incredible commercial success of the band.

On the other hand, the band used the cultural traditions of British literature in its lyrics much more than 'average' for rock music. Performances in historical costumes (which refer to the traditions of the music hall) combined with innovative engagement on the Internet to break the boundaries between the band and its fans. The resulting 'alloy' transformed the rules and not only simulated and reproduced the old, but also created something new. In general, the past was used as an archive of materials which were then processed ('bricolage' or what Frederic Jameson calls 'pastiche').

In the case of *the Libertines*, we can talk about the general cultural situation in modern British popular music and highlight a new model of working with the past, which is tentatively named *retro*. This model can be characterized by the following mechanisms of treating the past. First, *retro* attracts artefacts of popular culture for further processing and presenting in the form of artificial past in present time. Second, playing with the past is typical for retro, rather than idealisation or sentimentality that is typical for nostalgia. Talking about *the Libertines*, in this case, we can see some attempts to go beyond the indicated model of treating the past in modern British popular music. The bands carefully reproduce this model, working with musical traditions and combining different musical styles and genres of the past. Nevertheless, the

⁴⁰ Jameson, F. *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

⁴¹ Williams, R. *The Long Revolution*. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2001. pp. 64–65.

musicians of *the Libertines* go beyond simple styling in their references to cultural traditions in a broader sense (literature, cinema, television).

The frame of understanding of popular music based on *popular music studies*, as we see, can significantly advance the study of popular music and identify new problem areas. Such a view could include popular music in many investigations of the past and history in social sciences and humanities. All representations of the past in different cultural forms are interrelated and interact. In this regard, it is important to differentiate historical images and to identify approaches to the typology of different models of ‘working’ with the past; to trace the images of the past; to distinguish specific ideas about the past, developed in other symbolic universes.

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