

# *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*



Stephen Hill - University of Winchester

## **Introduction**

Within the Academy, *Smash Hits*, the British music magazine launched by EMAP and Nick Logan in 1978, is synonymous with the 1980s. And it is easy to see why. Though the magazine continued until 2006, the apex of its success coincides with Margaret Thatcher's second term in office and the rise of what is often labelled New Pop (Duran Duran, Culture Club, Spandau Ballet etc). While the magazine was an immediate success when it was launched in 1978, with a circulation figure of 166,000 for January to June 1979, these figures are eclipsed by sales from the mid-1980s, when the magazine frequently sold in excess of half a million copies a fortnight. The mid-Eighties was also the period in which Dave Hepworth and Mark Ellen presided over the magazine; it is without doubt that their subsequent influence on the development of magazine publishing through the Nineties and into the digital age has added historical pertinence to this later period in *Smash Hits* history. Less widely considered, however, is the period in which *Smash Hits* was edited by Nick Logan and Ian Cranna (1978 to 1981), the magazine's footprint in the Seventies and its relationship with the post-Punk mainstream: bands like The Police, Blondie and The Jam. That this period has been passed over in the process of historicisation is remarkable given the longevity of music from that era and the widespread recognition of Nick Logan's work on both *NME* and *The Face*. Moreover, the overnight success of the magazine and the speed with which it overtook its competitors in terms of sales suggests *Smash Hits* was perhaps more in tune with the music scene in Britain

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

at the end of the Seventies than more established titles like *NME* and *Melody Maker*. We can only hypothesise, therefore, as to the reasons for the hitherto neglect of *Smash Hits* in the Seventies.

I

### **Theoretical approaches**

Perhaps one reason that the legacy of *Smash Hits* in the 1970s has been passed over is that from a classic Cultural Studies perspective, it is much simpler to read *Smash Hits* mainstream sensibility as a regressive force. Taking the neo Marxist tools of Stuart Hall et al as a deconstructive framework, for example, it is easy to see how *Smash Hits* could be viewed as a principal agent in the acquiescence of cultural consent to the wider political hegemony and the climate of aspiration that underpinned free market capitalism in the 1980s. In *Rip it Up and Start Again* (2006), for example, Simon Reynolds fetishises the authenticity of the alternative scene and presents *Smash Hits* as mainstream and Thatcherite. And certainly the glossy lifestyle appeal of *Smash Hits* coverage of New Pop bands reinforces this idea. However, as I will go on to discuss, this view of *Smash Hits* as Thatcherite only really works with what *Smash Hits* became in the 1980s and over-simplifies consideration of *Smash Hits* in the 1970s. Just as *Smash Hits* preceded Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister so too was the magazine more varied in its coverage in the 1970s than its New Pop forebear would suggest.

From a more historical perspective there is perhaps another reason why the legacy of *Smash Hits* in the 1970s has been sidelined. Ignoring the post-Punk mainstream and focusing instead upon post MTV culture of New Pop fits with what Dave Rimmer defines as the 'cyclical theory of pop':

Spin the wheel, watch it turn. Rock and Roll in 1956, beat and the Beatles in 1963, hippies and psychedelia in 1967, Bowie and Roxy and glam rock in

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

1972, punk in 1976... watch it turn. As an old wave degenerates and expires, so a new wave explodes and regenerates. Every five years or so the paradigms shift. So runs the cyclical theory of pop and so, after punk, we get the New Pop. Simple isn't it? (Rimmer 1985 P11)

With the benefit of hindsight of course it is easy to see that New Pop has not been historicised with the same vigour that preceding moments in youth culture have been revisited; the hippy era and Punk, for example, are viewed as being far more important than the air brushed gloss of New Pop. And, indeed, when considering the 1980s it perhaps the emergence of House music at the end of the decade that is of greater significance to Popular Music Studies. That said, within the Academy as a whole, the significance of the New Pop era is born out in the range and breadth of work considering the music video in the 1980s. Writers like Kaplan (1993), Schwichtenberg (1993) and Skeggs (1993), for example, have produced compelling readings of such texts that emphasises the radical gender politics of musical performance. Often labelled 'Madonna studies', this branch of Queer Theory has been very persuasive in interpolating the work of Foucault (1976) and Butler (1990) with popular music texts. In this direction Diane Railton (2001) has written on more contemporary issues of *Smash Hits* emphasising the gender and the carnivalesque. What is sidelined in readings such as this is the role of music in the production of meaning.

Aside from annexing the legacy of *Smash Hits* in the 1970s, the problem with approaches to *Smash Hits* emanating from Cultural Studies and Queer Theory is that they have the tendency to view the legacy of the magazine as problematic. And certainly within Popular Music Studies this sceptical attitude towards the title permeates. In *Understanding Popular Music* (2001) by Roy Shukar, for example, *Smash Hits* is viewed as part of the omnibus term 'teen glossies': titles aimed at girls

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

that make 'stars accessible to adolescent fantasy' (Shukar, 2001, 90). Elsewhere, great emphasis is placed on the magazine's use of language and appropriation of consumer vocabulary. Eamonn Forde in particular attributes the decline of 'personality' in the music press to *Smash Hits* and what he describes as the monoglotic corporate tone of music journalism in the Eighties (Q, *The Face* etc). What is often over-looked, however, is the way in which *Smash Hits* transformed the music press at the end of the Seventies by celebrating the surface culture of popular music. It is my contention therefore that the magazine had a profound effect not just on publishing but also on the way in which popular music was conceptualised. In the course of this article I will suggest that *Smash Hits* exposed a sophisticated system of visual grammar that reveals a great deal about the way in which pop texts communicate. Moreover, I will contend that in light of the way in which the music scene shifted in the 1980s and beyond, recovering the archives of *Smash Hits* in the 1970s is potentially very relevant to contemporary understanding of popular music and indeed leads the way to a more aesthetic awareness of the way in which pop texts work.

### **The post-Punk Mainstream**

Before we begin to extrapolate the ways in which *Smash Hits* transformed understanding of popular music at the end of the 1970s, it is perhaps worth pausing to consider in much broader terms the reasons why that period is important. In the first instance, the late Seventies represents the height of singles sales in the UK. It is interesting to note, for example, that fifty percent of the records in the British Phonographic Industry top ten singles of all time (Fig 1) were released in the 1970s with a definite emphasis on the latter half of the decade. This trend culminated in 1979 with 86 million singles sales: the highest yearly figures for the sale of singles in the UK to date. Surveying the end of year top tens (Fig 2) for the years 78,79 and 80 it is also interesting to note the variety of musical styles enjoying commercial

# Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits

**Fig 1 Top ten selling British singles of all time**

1. Elton John Candle In The Wind 97/ Something About The Way...(1997)
2. Band Aid Do They Know It's Christmas Time? (1984)
3. Queen. Bohemian Rhapsody (1975)
4. Wings Mull Of Kintyre/Girls School (1977)
5. Boney M Rivers Of Babylon/Brown Girl In The Ring (1978)
6. John Travolta And Olivia Newton John You're The One That I Want (1978)
7. Frankie Goes To Hollywood Relax (1984)
8. The Beatles She Loves You (1963)
9. Robson & Jerome Unchained Melody (1995)
10. Boney M Mary's Boy Child/Oh My Lord (1977)

**Fig 2 End of Year Top Ten Singles 1978 to 1980 (BPI)**

1978	1979	1980
1. Boney M Rivers of Babylon/Brown Girl in the Ring	1. Art Garfunkel Bright Eyes	1. The Police Don't Stand So Close To Me
2. John Travolta and Olivia Newton John You're The One That I Want	2. Blondie Heart Of Glass	2. Barbara Streisand Woman In Love
3 John Travolta and Olivia Newton John Summer Nights	3. Cliff Richard We Don't Talk Anymore	3 Kelly Marie Feels Like I'm In Love
4. The Commodores Three Times a Lady	4. Boomtown Rats I Don't Like Mondays	4. Abba Super Trouper
5. The Bee Gees Night Fever	5. Dr Hook When You're In Love With A Beautiful Woman	5. Ottewan DISCO
6. Father Abraham The Smurf Song	6. Glora Gaynor I Will Survive	6. Blondie The Tide Is High
7. Abba Take a Chance on Me	7. Tubeway Army Are Friends Electric	7. Dexy's Midnight Runners Geno
8. Brian Michael Matchstalk Men and Matchstalk Cats and Dogs	8. Blondie Sunday Girl	8. Kenny Rogers Coward of the Country
9. Boomtown Rats Rat Trap	9 Roxy Music Dance Away	9. Fern Kineey Together We're Beautiful
10. Kate Bush Wuthering Height	10. Lena Martell One Day At A Time	10. John Lennon (Just Like) Starting Over

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

success: disco, rock 'n' roll, easy listening, euro-pop, punk/new wave, electronica, singer song-writer, reggae, country and western. And, indeed, as I shall go on to discuss, this breadth of styles is reflected in the choice of performers selected for the front cover of *Smash Hits*. For Gary Mullholland this diversity within the mainstream of pop is something unique to the end of the 1970s

1979 was in pop music terms at least, gloriously nuts. Punk and disco had taken the music industry by surprise and, as they struggled to understand what kind of strange noise and voices pop fans wanted, they allowed artists a degree of freedom and adventure that echoed the joy and tumult of the mid-60s. 1979 saw the peak and end of that process. (Mullholland 2002 76).

Of particular significance was the influence of European disco on some very mainstream rock acts (Rod Stewart, The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd etc). While this cross-over incited anger from some US audiences (resulting in campaigns like Disco Sucks and Disco Demolition Night) in many ways they set the template for the modern rock song, most significantly in their use of synthesisers. Likewise, the hits of post-Punk stars were set to new rhythms: most notably Blondie's 'Heart of Glass' (a reggae song set to a Moroder beat) and The Police's 'Message in a Bottle' (reggae meets New Wave). It was, in short, a period in which every flavour was on the menu and no style seemed to clash. And yet, within the Academy the period has almost been written out of pop history: a no-mans land between Punk and the video culture of New Pop and Madonna Studies.

### **The Star Groups of Punk**

Central to my case for the period covered by *Smash Hits* is the legacy of what Rimmer has defined as 'the star groups of punk': The Police, Blondie and The Jam. History has judged these bands to be far more influential than any of their New Pop

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

successors. While the legacy of avant-garde groups like Gang of Four, Material and Devo may, as Reynold's suggests, be being rediscovered by a new generation of musicians, New Pop is indeed, that of a 'campy comedy zone... .. eyeliner-and-synth fops with silly haircuts' (Reynolds 2005 XV). Few bands today cite Adam and the Ants or Spandau Ballet as major influences. By contrast Paul Weller, Deborah Harry and Sting have become iconic figures: continuing to fill large concert halls and commanding considerable media attention for their new recordings. In part this is because they belong to a very interesting period in mainstream of popular music. However, it is also a reflection of their higher commercial status in the first place. In the period covered by Reynold's, for example, both Blondie and The Police had five number one singles in the UK, and The Jam four (*The Guinness Book of Hit Singles*). None of the New Pop bands can match the singles chart achievement of the 'star groups' of punk. By the same token the period in which Nick Logan and Ian Cranna edited *Smash Hits* (1978 to 1980) is significant because the singles chart featured a much earlier generation of stars whose careers did not continue at the same stratospheric level into the 1980s: Abba, Donna Summer, David Bowie, Bryan Ferry etc. Not only has their legacy proved to be much greater than those of the New Pop stars but also their place in the pop music scene is documented in the pages of *Smash Hits* of the period.

### **Reconfiguring Authenticity in the Music Press**

It is perhaps worth pausing at this juncture to gesture towards the role of *Smash Hits* in my wider research, which focuses on the role of authenticity in the British music press. Though the parameters of my research are the period 1978 to 1988 and the titles *Smash Hits*, *The Face* and *Q*, it has been necessary to place this in the context of the development of both British and American titles that include *NME*, *Rolling Stone*, *Melody Maker*, *Creem* amongst others. In this sense *Smash Hits* is significant because it debunks the myth of authenticity that had survived Punk, and paves the

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

way for Q, which reconfigured authenticity as a more plural and contingent construct. And, from a theoretical perspective it perhaps the missing link between what Eamonn Forde describes 'polyglots' and the 'monoglots': the personality journalism of the *NME* (influenced by New Journalism and Beats) and the more measured corporate tone of the Eighties (influenced by the kind of lifestyle journalism pioneered by *The Face*). The legacy of Nick Logan is of course pivotal to this. On the one hand, at the *NME*, Logan was responsible for hiring the 'hip young gun slingers' Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill; their acerbic and highly polemic approach exemplifying the polyglottic style. On the other hand, with *The Face*, Logan addressed a more urbane audience with measured prose and a more consistent house style in which music was positioned alongside other lifestyle products. In this sense *Smash Hits* is interesting because it represents a halfway point between the political rhetoric of Seventies music journalism and the more aesthetic sensibilities of the metropolitan avant-garde in the Eighties.

### **The Magazine Industry**

How *Smash Hits* changed the role of the British music press at the end of the Seventies goes beyond the theoretical conjectures of academics. First and foremost *Smash Hits* changed that way music magazines looked: its visual style, A4 format and use of colour were very different to the smudgy black and white of the 'inkies' that preceded it. It presented pop culture in a way that was very different: the design and layout was influenced by fashion photography and the copy deployed stylistic conventions of consumer journalism evaluating pop music as a product. In short the magazine embodied a whole new sensibility for thinking about pop music: a more post-modern aesthetic in which the consumption of pop music was viewed as a part of the reflexive construction of self. This commercial approach was reflected in the magazines preference for the mainstream. *Smash Hits* did not distinguish between genres providing they sold in sufficient quantity. Pop is a broad church and the

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

diversity of cover stars between 1978 and 1980 reflects this catholic taste: The Clash, Donna Summer, Bryan Ferry, Madness, Ian Dury, Bob Marley, Kate Bush etc. However, as the words of *NME* staff writer Steve Cosgrove make clear, in some quarters this less discriminating approach was viewed as suspicious:

On the one hand you had this newspaper that had its roots in the idea that pop and rock could change the world and this other magazine that didn't want to change the world it just wanted to change its shirt (*25 Years of Smash Hits*, Channel 4, 2003).

And it is easy to see why. Unlike the music press that preceded it *Smash Hits* was not steeped in the resolution of what John Stratton (1982) perceives as an ideological tension between art and commerce. Neither did it pander to the inclinations of what Riesman (1950) categorised as sensitive minority listeners. Instead *Smash Hits* celebrated the (extra) ordinariness of the commercial mainstream. Looking back at *Smash Hits* 30 years on, however, there is considerable evidence to suggest that this banality was not without purpose.

### **Reframing *Smash Hits***

In the various accounts of *Smash Hits* that exist within the Academy, which, as previously discussed, focus principally on *Smash Hits* in the 1980s, there is general consensus that the magazine transformed the mores of the music press in its celebration of the more ephemeral surface culture. And, for my own part I am inserting the two caveats. Firstly, reframing that history to include the magazine footprint in the 1970s is significant because it gives a window onto a very interesting moment in the evolution of pop. Secondly, *Smash Hits* in the Seventies is a space in which the perpetuity of the music scene as a whole could be viewed regardless of genre; like BBC's *Top of the Pops*, *Smash Hits* was a bandstand phenomenon

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

showcasing a broad spectrum of acts. The third revision that needs to be made concerns the tacit assumption that the magazine celebrated the visual at the expense of the written word. In part this can be attributed to the novelty of the presentational devices used in *Smash Hits*. As Nick Logan himself conceded when, in 1978, EMAP distributed a test issue in Middlesbrough, it was the 'glossiness of the paper' (Logan cited by Gorman, 2001, 283) that hooked the sample audience and not the music coverage. And so while Roy Shukar is quite right to argue that 'teenage girls purchase *Smash Hits* and its competitors in part for the posters' (Shukar, 2001, 90) that should not preclude consideration of the language. Moreover, though detailed consideration is beyond the scope of this article, it is certainly worth mentioning that the reproduction of song *lyrics* were a key part of *Smash Hits* appeal.

### ***The Language of Smash Hits***

In part the preoccupation with the visual culture of *Smash Hits* can be attributed to a higher ratio of image to text than the music press that preceded it. However, the articles themselves are fairly in-depth: assuming high levels of discursive ability on the part of the reader, in terms of both vocabulary and grammatical construction. For example, Dave Hepworth's article on Madness is written in the affectionate tones of a lenient schoolmaster: indulging the whimsical folly of his precocious underlings.

MADNESS' ALBUM presents a fifty/fifty split between ska-inspired dance numbers and their own earthy tales of London low life. Lee Thompson's coarse sax is well to the fore as is Mike Barton's pumping keyboard technique. The band have chosen to label it the 'nutty' sound, a term thought up by Thompson to describe the noise of fairground organs. It's a rough lively sound, jaunty and old fashioned. On stage Chas Smash does his strange ratchet dance to the real delight of packed houses. A few shortcomings in the vocal department and an over reliance on the same tempo apart, they're

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

enormously enjoyable. Family fun. (*Smash Hits* Vol1 No 26, December 1979, 27))

Here the mixture of assonance (ska-inspired, dance, numbers) and alliteration (London low life) creates a haughty timbre. Likewise the ambiguity of the adverbial phrase 'well to the fore' leaves it up to the reader to decide whether that is a good or bad thing. Similarly, the quotation marks around the word 'nutty' convey mock shock and surprise at the bands description of their sound: these markers of speech serving as linguistic signifiers for the raising of eyebrows and the rolling of eyes. As the section proceeds Hepworth's affectation of conservative befuddlement is reinforced by the selection of certain outmoded words and phrases; 'lively sound', 'jaunty', 'delight', 'enormously enjoyable' and 'family fun' all sound like manners of speech from a previous era: to be enunciated in the clipped tones of Received Pronunciation. This seniority of position of is reinforced by tagline accompanying the main headline: 'they call it MADNESS. Dr Hepworth dons a white coat and investigates'. However, the medical allusion is purposefully mocking: an ironic commentary on the role of the music press; Hepworth is cast in the elevated role of physician, while Madness constitute but symptom in the corpus of pop. On the face of things this superior tone marks *Smash Hits* out as supercilious and patronizing. And, indeed, criticism has been levelled at EMAPS subsequent creation Q, which Hepworth was heavily involved in, for being smarmy and condescending. However, in *Smash Hits* the subtle interpellation of words and phrases assumes high levels of both literacy and cultural capital on the part of the reader. For example, the verb 'don' is polysemantic, meaning in this sense to put on a garment but also signalling to the noun that signifies a person of great importance. Likewise, 'white coat' is play upon 'madness' as a clinical diagnosis and the garb common to medical practitioners in a sanatorium. Elsewhere metaphorical reference to the 'sweetness' of chart success, idiomatic expressions such as 'the ska 'gravy train' and a theatrical allusion

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

to 'the boards' keeps things varied and makes the adolescent audience work hard. In this way the magazine is encrypted with a subtle and secret code, which includes the reader and purposefully subverts the more pompous impulses of popular music writing. So while the exposition of the hierarchical processes at work in the music press is perhaps a unique feature of *Smash Hits*, its corollary is the empowerment of the audience.

It is perhaps the use of irony that marks out the written style of *Smash Hits* from the bombastic polemicism of inkies. For example in the short editorial by Dave Hepworth to accompany a photomontage of Blondie on the set of the Alan Rudolph film *Roadie* (1980) the satire is affectionate rather than biting:

EVERYBODY GOT popcorn? OK, it's Film Fun Time! So settle down in your seats and quit eyeing the person next to you for a minute while we fill you in on progress made so far on Blondie's World Domination-By-The-Eighties Plan (Silver Screen Division). The pix (below and over the page) were all snapped in Austin Texas, deep in the heart of cowboy country where men are men and mules are mules and never is heard a discouraging word. This is where the band have been filming 'Roadie' with weightwatchers favourite rock and roll star, Meatloaf.

Hepworth injects new life into worn-out stock phrases: intensifying tired idioms with an ironic tone and self-effacing mockery. While the use of rhetorical devices, punctuation for effect, hedges and causal connectives are all fairly standard artillery in the journalistic armoury, it is the invitation to inhabit a parallel fantasy world that is most seductive: a landscape demarked by the hyper-real iconography of the popular imagination. From the cinematic optimism of the 'Silver Screen' to the cold-war

## Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits



Fig 3

Fig 4

Fig 5

Fig 6

anxiety of 'World Domination' Hepworth's imagery is painted in the heightened colours of a Warhol silk screen. In this sense the magazine paves the way for the polished journalese of *Q*, not least in the retrospective sensibility when dealing with older recording artists. In a feature article on Roxy Music, for example, Deanne Pearson's prose also assumes high levels of cultural capital on the part of the reader in her consideration of the 'glitter era' and the band 'post-re-union'. While defending *Smash Hits* against the accusation that it was mercantile flies in the face of its own Pop Art project, it needs to be made clear that the assumption that it was lowbrow and charm-less is historically inaccurate. That said, what *Smash Hits* has to offer Popular Music Studies does not solely concern the written word but draws instead upon the way in which the visual culture encodes some very specific strategies for listening.

### The Visual Culture of *Smash Hits*

Textual analysis of *Smash Hits* between 1978 and 1980 reveals the complexity of the messages and values encoded in the visual culture of the magazine. It is, however, impossible to consider the visual without acknowledging the interpellation of text to fix and sometimes liberate meaning. Taking the form of a detailed examination of the way in which ten lead articles communicate in words and pictures, focusing on the

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*



**Fig 7**

**Fig 8**

**Fig 9**

**Fig 10**

cover shot as well as the layout and positioning of the article, a number of key findings emerge. Firstly, as I have already suggested, there is it would seem no genre bias in early *Smash Hits*: disco, punk, ska and reggae are all covered. Though the artists featured are predominantly white, this reflects the demographic of the singles chart rather than a separate ideological agenda. For the purposes of the investigation issues featuring both Bob Marley and Donna Summer were selected and it is reassuring to note that race was not foregrounded in interviews with either star. That said the feature article on Bob Marley was elaborate in its exposition of the cultural context of Rastafarian religion denoted by the singer crocheted hat and dreadlocks on the front cover. And indeed the solemnity of shot selected of Marley for the cover betrays an overt reverence for the reggae star the counterpoises the more objectifying gaze characteristic of other cover shots.

Secondly, It is without question that the house style of *Smash Hits* photography was much more seductive than *NME* or *Melody Maker*. In part this can be attributed to the luscious colour and quality of the paper. And, indeed the addition of poster supplements and pictures to stick on bedroom walls was key to the magazines teen appeal. Though the Nick Logan era of *Smash Hits* precedes the launch of MTV by three years, the magazine reflects the rise of music videos production during the Seventies and an increasingly visual portmanteau of stars from the Glam rock era

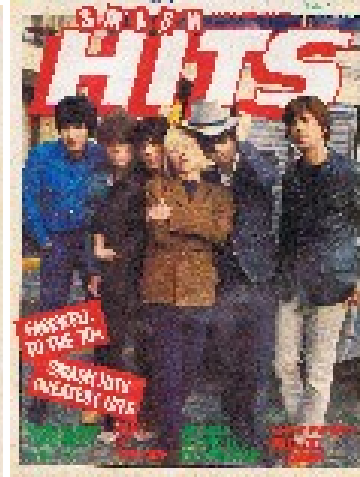
## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*



**Fig 11**



**Fig 12**



**Fig 13**

onwards. This increased reliance upon the visual is reflected in the occlusion of straplines to identify the cover star: recognition of a band or performer is based upon their appearance rather than name. This very visual sensibility is reflected also in the colour pallet used for fonts and text boxes: the use of garish pinks and yellows alludes to the visual codes of Punk and the Pop Art sensibility of Warhol. Indeed, it is this presentation of stars as consumer objects that is perhaps the key to the magazines appeal.

The third key trend emerging from analysis of *Smash Hits* is that typically musicians are not depicted in naturalistic poses. Instead the visual style favours hyper-real Technicolor, foregrounding either a pin-up status or cartoon like quality. In this case of a band like The Police this works very well: the rugged good looks, tanned complexion, and tousled blond hair lend the mid shot of this robust threesome on the cover of *Smash Hits* in August 1979 a naturally iconic quality. While *Smash Hits* addressed a less singular demographic in the 1970s than its core readership of teenage girls in the 1980s, early editions are remarkable for the way in which some quite improbable male subjects are as reconstructed as pin-ups: an unlikely 'boy band' the homo-social bonding depicted on The Clash's front cover from December 1979 renders the quintet impassive and objectified. Likewise, the stylised studio shot

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

of The Jam positions Paul Weller in the role of teen idol. By contrast the portrait of Ian Dury from the same month plays up the eccentric qualities of the Blockhead's front man: the singer's optician-style glasses serving as a visual motif for Dury's musical idiosyncrasy. That the shot purposefully eschews depiction of Dury's impaired gait incurred through a bout of polio in childhood is telling however as to the parameters of taste within which the magazine operates. Focusing on the glasses instead serves not only to distance him from the audience but also to reconstruct Dury as a more cartoon-like figure: a less defective caricature who can be assimilated into the mainstream. And, indeed *Smash Hits* does not subvert the hegemony: solo female stars like Donna Summer and Kate Bush are presented in way that fetishise their sexuality. An anomaly in this sense is the image of Deborah Harry on the cover of *Smash Hits* from December 1979. In which the singer appears androgynous, positioned amongst her male band mates, dressed down in casual jeans and a jacket. As in its depiction of genre it would seem that *Smash Hits* is remarkable for the parity in its depiction of gender: a level playing field in which the subject may be sexualised and objectified regardless of sex, race or musical style.

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

### **Fig 14 - Madness (December 1979)**

#### **Madness and the Genealogy of Musical Form**

While *Smash Hits* in the Seventies is remarkable for its celebration of the visual culture of pop and the creation of a value neutral space in terms of the representation of genre, the magazine is not impervious to genealogy of the musical form. Indeed, in the representation of stars the visual codes denote some very specific strategies for listening. For example, on the surface the medium long shot of Madness on the cover of *Smash Hits* from December 1979 serves as a visual metaphor for the meaning of the bands name. The full-length photo of the sextet allows for considerable interplay in body language, posture, clothing codes and facial expression. However, it also serves as an anthropomorphosis of the bands musical style. In this sense the cover encodes many of the key stylistic elements of the 2-Tone Ska scene in Britain at the end of the 1970s. The self-conscious eccentricity of the band reflects the quirkiness of the Ska genre; originating in Jamaica in the late 1950s, the proliferation of transistor radio and access to American radio influenced a generation of musicians like Ernest Ranglin and Prince Buster who re-worked the 4/4 time signature of rhythm and blues to accentuate the second and fourth beat of the bar with the guitar chop with which Ska became synonymous. The pork pie hat worn by Daniel Woodgate, for example, is a homage to the sartorial codes of Sixties Kingston 'rude boys', as are the sharp suits of Mark Bedford and Suggs, which themselves re-worked the clothing conventions of American Jazz musicians like Lester Young. The posture of the group is also ideologically significant: a freeze frame of the 'skank' dance popularised by audiences in the Jamaican dance halls where Ska music was originally played. In short, the cover is deceptively shambolic: out of a chaotic confusion of styles, a structured and coherent system of ideas emerges.

### **Fig 15 - The Clash (December 1979)**

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

### **The Clash and objectification of Masculinity**

While the cover shot of Madness falls into the same category of caricature/cartoon occupied by Ian Dury the same process of deconstruction can be applied to shots in which the male subject is more objectified. The high angle medium shot of The Clash on the front cover of *Smash Hits* from December 1979 is animated by the dynamic interaction between the body language of guitarist/vocalist Joe Strummer and drummer Nicholas Bowen Headon. The composition of the shot emphasis the band's brotherly intimacy: all figures are closely positioned with raised arms around their shoulders. The interpellation with violence and passion is clearly a reflection of the bands' music style. However, once again the clothing codes reveal the genealogy of their musical lineage. Most prominent is Headon who sports traditional Punk look, reminiscent of Johnny Rotton of The Sex Pistols: a tight fitting distressed denim jacket and dishevelled bristly red hair. However, the image of Chinese martial artist Bruce Lee printed on his T-shirt is symbolic re-joiner to the mainstream: codifying the brutal and 'combative' quality of the music in the vernacular of popular culture. By contrast the rockabilly style of Joe Strummer's jacket and his more coiffured hairstyle alludes to 1950s rock and roll icons like Elvis Presley and Bill Haley. Whether or not the nuances of signification are explicitly understood by the audience is less important than the sophistication it assumes on the part of mainstream taste. And indeed this is perhaps very much a function of the richness of the pop scene at the end of the Seventies. That on the cover of *Smash Hits* in Headon and Strummer act out the tension between Punk and the historical antecedents of rock and roll is unique: the physical conflict serving as a visual motif for the reconstructed sensibility of the post-Punk mainstream.

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

### **Fig 16 – Bryan Ferry (June 1980)**

#### **Bryan Ferry and the Commoditisation of Lifestyle**

The concomitant sophistication of the music and culture of the mainstream post-Punk is in part what makes *Smash Hits* very special in this period. Foregrounding the visual is not at the expense of the soundtrack but rather is intrinsic to understanding the lineage of the musical text. Indeed, this process of exposition can be repeated in the deconstruction of cover shots and images of some very mainstream stars. For example, the high angle medium shot of Bryan Ferry on the cover of *Smash Hits* from June 1980 communicates very well the louche playboy affectations with which the Roxy Music star is synonymous. His tanned skin suggests a jet-set lifestyle; offset by the cool crispness of his white linen shirt, his collar is casually unbuttoned and the sleeves are rolled up, connoting both effortless style and sophistication. The warm light and long shadows suggest a continental climate that is reinforced by the peony pink of the masthead and strapline font. This sub-tropical flavour is enhanced by the whitewashed Hacienda style of the backdrop. As a code for deconstructing the music of Bryan Ferry, this cover of *Smash Hits* tells the reader much that it needs to know about the Roxy Music aesthetic: class and social mobility being central motifs in the bands legacy. Unlike their New Pop forebears (Duran, Duran, Spandau Ballet or Wham!) Roxy Music do not celebrate the hard currency of bourgeois living but rather luxuriate in the opulence of cultural capital; from the tasteful and expansive production values of the music to the understated designs of their Anthony Price designed cover art, as the *Smash Hits* cover shows, Roxy Music deal in mannered sophistication and modest elegance. That ultimately their music has been assimilated as an aesthetic backdrop to gracious living cannot diminish the parodic critique of the high-life encoded in the collision of musical styles and visual representations.

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

### **Fig 17 – Donna Summer (June 1979)**

#### **Donna Summer and the Female Subject**

One of the ways in which the legacy of *Smash Hits* in the Seventies is perhaps most transforming, is that its sensitivity to the aesthetic nuance of pop is not confined to its depiction of male stars. The representation of female artists is something that is extremely problematic when considering the legacy of both the New Journalism infused titles of the Seventies (*NME*, *Rolling Stone*, *Melody Maker* etc) and the historical prerogative of *Q* and its imitators in the Eighties and Nineties (*Vox*, *Select*, *Moro* etc). By contrast *Smash Hits* positions the female subject at the forefront of the pop scene. Deborah Harry is exemplary of this trend: not only were Blondie featured on the first issue of the magazine in '78 but she is a recurrent cover star throughout 79 and 80. As David Hepworth describes it on the documentary *25 Years of Smash Hits* (2003) Harry was the dream cover star. And indeed as the December '79 issue shows, the singer's position as a musician in the band is something that the photography of *Smash Hits* foregrounds. That is not to say that shots of other stars and indeed other cover shot of Harry do not objectify the female subject in ways Feminist readings might make problematic. Rather the representation of the female subject in *Smash Hits* is transforming, because she is visible and considered on equal, albeit fetishised terms, as her male counter-part. In this sense one could take exception to the doe-eyed facial expression of Donna Summer, were it not for the fact that this garb is in fact true to the context of the music. The shot creates the atmosphere of an intimate live show: as if the singer is performing in a discothèque. The microphone she is clutching in her left hand reinforces this: held at the same coquettish angle as her head. The assumption that she is performing is encoded by the shot: her lips are parted to form only the most gentle of apertures as if miming to one of her erotic disco classics. It is this performative element of pop that *Smash*

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

*Hits* celebrates: the construction of artifice. While previous accounts are wont to labour the gender politics of camp as a semiotic event, in *Smash Hits*, camp - if that's what it is - is value neutral. Its transgressive quality does not occur in the subversion of mainstream narratives but the equanimity with which that sensibility is applied to a wide range of texts. Are The Clash camp? Maybe. Or maybe not. The point is, that you would have to work very hard to argue that they are. The beauty of *Smash Hits* is that it renders that question redundant. Instead it invites us to consider and celebrate the way in which our idea of The Clash is constructed and what this might mean for the way in which we listen to their music.

### **Conclusion – The Televisual Aesthetic of *Smash Hits***

Clearly the visual culture of *Smash Hits* challenged the production of meaning in the music press that preceded it. It opposed the polemics of the personality writers and the superiority of the written word. However, from my own perspective the real significance of *Smash Hits* at the end of the Seventies is the ideological shift it marked in the way in which audiences thought about popular music: challenging the primacy of authenticity as a barometer of culture taste. In part this can be attributed to the playful and ironic tone of the editorial. And, indeed, in this sense the magazine opened up a space of the more sophisticated consumer journalism of Q. However, it is without doubt the visual culture of *Smash Hits* that is potentially most interesting to the development of Popular Music Studies: reacquainting popular music with its more performative dimension and the simulacra of the musical recording. In this sense *Smash Hits* side steps the tension between Musicological approaches to popular music and those emanating from the Social Sciences by celebrating the synthetic qualities of the surface culture. Instead it provides a vision of popular music that is true to what Simon Frith has described as its 'televisual sensibility' and the defining influence of television on the rock and roll aesthetic.

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

Focusing on popular music since the 1950s, Frith argues that rock stars not only have to be telegenic in order to succeed but that the conventions of a good television performance have come to define what is understood by a good rock performance. In this sense the visual artifice of *Smash Hits* is perhaps closer to the core aesthetic of rock and roll than the superannuated postulations of the inkies. As Frith suggests: 'for all the ideological importance of its live performance, rock is the first popular musical form to be constructed in the studio' (Frith, 2002, 286). Deposing of genre distinction is key to this sensibility as is the levelling of cultural order imposed by the primacy of the visual in *Smash Hits*. The legacy of the magazine is that it exposes the ideological parameters within which popular music texts are deconstructed as contingent mythologies: mythologies to which the audience subscribe or do not in their reading(s) of the text. In this sense Pop, rock punk and reggae are not discrete genres in *Smash Hits* but shifting strategies; strategies used by the audience to understand not only the popular music to which they listen but also their own identity as audience members. The significance of the televisual aesthetic of *Smash Hits*, then, stretches beyond the moment of its inception at the end of the Seventies and the begetting of video pop in the 1980s, and offers instead a viable mode of deconstruction for all popular music culture formed in the image of the cathode ray.

# *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

## **Bibliography**

Burchill, Julie and Tony Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny* (1978, 1987; Faber and Faber, London).

Butler, Judith, 'Imitations and Gender Insubordination', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), (1998; Blackwell, London).

Cleto, F. 2000. 'Camp' in *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia* by G. Haggerty (ed) (2000; Routledge, London).

Coates, Norma. 'Revolution Now' in *Sexing The Groove – Popular Music and Gender* by Sheila Whitely (ed) (1997; Routledge, London).

Cook, Nicholas, 'Analysing Performance and Performing Analysis', in *Rethinking Music* by Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Eds). (1999; Oxford University Press, Oxford).

Davies. Helen. 'All rock and roll is homosocial: the representation of women in the British rock music press' in *Popular Music* Volume 20/3 (2001; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge)

Egan, Vince 'review of Simon Reynold's *Rip it Up and Start Agai* (2005)' in *Popular Music*, Vol 25, Issue 3 (2007; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge)

Foucault, Michel. *The Will To Knowledge*, (1976; Penguin Books London)

Forde, Eamonn 'From polygottism to branding. On the decline of personality journalism in the British press' In *Journalism* Vol.2 (1) 2001.

Frith, Mark. *The Best of Smash Hits* (2006; Sphere, London)

Frith, Simon and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop*, (1987; Methuen, London).

Firth, Simon, 'Look! Hear! The uneasy relationship of music and television' in *Popular Music* Volume 21/3 (2002; Cambridge University Press).

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

Frith, Simon *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Constable, 1983).

Frith, Simon, *Facing The Music: Essays on Pop, Rock and Culture* (1990; Mandarin, London).

Goodwin, Andrew, 'Sample and Hold – Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction' in *On the Record – Rock, Pop and the Written Word* by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (Eds) (1990; Routledge, London).

Gorman, Paul. *In Their Own Words – Adventures in the Music Press*. London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2001

Grossberg, Lawrence, 'The Media Economy of Rock Culture – Cinema, Postmodernity and Authenticity' in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader* by Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (Eds), (1993; Routledge, London).

Gudmundsson, Gustur, Ulf Lindberg, Morten Michelsen and Hans Weisethaunet. 'Brit Crit: Turning Points in British Rock Criticism 1960 – 1990' in *Pop Music and the Press* by Steve Jones (ed) (2002; Temple University Press, Philadelphia)

Hall, Stuart. 'Encoding/Decoding', in *Culture, Media, Language*, (1980; Hutchinson Press, London).

Harron, Mary, 'McRock: Pop as a Commodity', in *Facing The Music: Essays on Pop, Rock and Culture*, by Simon Frith (ed), (1990; Mandarin, London).

Hawkins, Stan 'Musicology, Masculinity, Banality' in *Sexing The Groove – Popular Music and Gender* by Sheila Whitely (ed) (1997; Routledge, London).

Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979, 1984; Routledge, London)

Hebdige, Dick. 'The Bottom Line on Planet One: Squaring Up to The Face', in *Hiding in the Light*. (1988; Routledge, London)

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (1991; 1991 reprint; Verso Press, London).

Jones, Allan (ed.), *Melody Maker: Classic Rock Interviews*, (1994; Mandarin, London).

Jones, Steve. *Pop Music and the Press* (2002; Temple University Press, Philadelphia)

Kaplan, E. Ann, 'Madonna Politics: Perversion, Repression, or Subversion? Or Masks and/as Master-y' in Cathy Schwichtenberg, *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*, (1993; Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado).

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road* (1957, 1991; Penguin, London)

Lerdahl, Fred. 'Cognitive Constraints on Compositional Systems in in *Contemporary Music Review* Vol 6 Issue 2 (1992; Routledge, London).

Lewis, George H, 'Who Do You Love?' in *Popular Music and Communication* by James Lull(ed), (1992; Sage Publications).

McRobbie, Angela. *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994; Routledge, London).

Mort, Frank, *Cultures of Consumption*, (1996; Routledge, London).

Mullholland, Gary, *This is Uncool: The 500 Greatest Singles Since Punk and Disco* (2002; Cassel, London).

Mulvey, Laura. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

Narmour, Eugene. *The Analysis and Cognition of Basic Melodic Structures* (1990; University of Chicago Press, Chicago).

Negus, Keith, *Popular Music in Theory* (1996, 2001; Polity Press, Cambridge).

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

Nixon, Sean, *Hard Looks: Masculinity, Spectatorship and Contemporary Consumption*, (1996; UCL Press, London).

O'Brien, Lucy. *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (1995; Continuum International Publishing Group, London)

Palmer, Gareth, 'Springsteen and Authentic Masculinity' in *Sexing The Groove – Popular Music and Gender* by Sheila Whitely (ed) (1997; Routledge, London).

Peiss, Kathy, 'Making Over: Cosmetics Consumer Culture and Women's Identity', in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, by Victoria de Grazia, and Ellen Furlough (eds.), (1996; University of California Press, London).

Railton, Diane. 'The Gendered Carnival of Pop' in *Popular Music* Volume 20/3 (2001 Cambridge University Press, Cambridge).

Reynolds, Simon. *Rip it Up and Start Again* (2006: Faber and Faber, London)

Riesman, David, 'Listening to Popular Music' in *On the Record – Rock, Pop and the Written Word* by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (Eds) (1990; Routledge, London), originally appeared in *American Quarterly* (Summer 1950), (1950; American Studies Association).

Robertson, Pamela. *Guilty Pleasures - Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (1996; I.B. Taurus & Co. London and New York).

Schwichtenberg, Cathy. 'Madonna's Postmodern Feminism: Bringing Margins to the Centre' in *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory* (1993; Westview Press, Colorado).

Shukar, Roy *Understanding Popular Music*, (2001, 1994; Routledge, London).

Sinfield, Alan. 'Culture, Consensus and Difference: Angus Wilson to Alan Hollinghurst', in *British Culture of the Postwar*, by Davis, Alistair and Alan Sinfield, (2000; Routledge, London).

## *Lost in the Seventies: The Secret History of Smash Hits*

Sontag, Susan. 'Notes on Camp' in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the performing subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (1964; 1999; University of Michigan Press Ann Arbor), 53-65.

Strachan Robert and Marion Leonard, 'Journalistic Practices' in *The Continuum Encyclopaedia of Popular Music of the World, Volume 1: Media Industry and Society*, Ed by David Horn, Dave Laing, and John Shepherd. (2003; Continuum, London).

Von Appen, Ralph and Andre Doehring, 'Nevermind The Beatles, here's Exile 61 and Nico: 'The top 100 records of all time' – a canon of pop and rock albums from a sociological and an aesthetic perspective' in *Popular Music History* Vol. 25/1 (2006, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge).

Whiteley, Sheila, 'Artifice and the Imperatives of Commercial Success – From Brit Pop to the Spice Girls' in *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*, (2000; Routledge, London).

Willis, Paul. E, 'A Theory for the Social Meaning of Pop' *Stencilled Occasional Paper, Sub and Popular Culture* Series: SP 13 (1974; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham).

Wolfe, Tom. *New Journalism* (1975; Picador, New York).